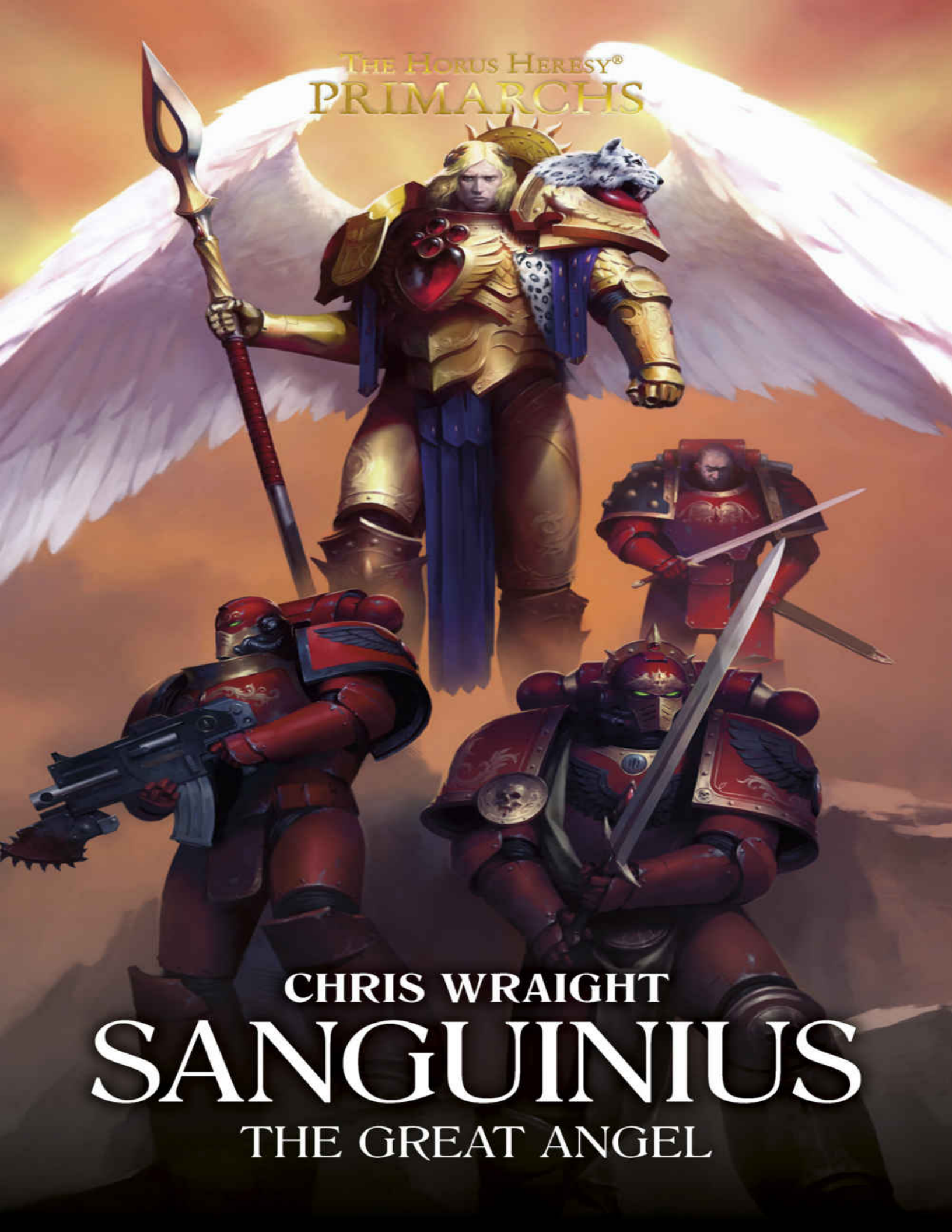
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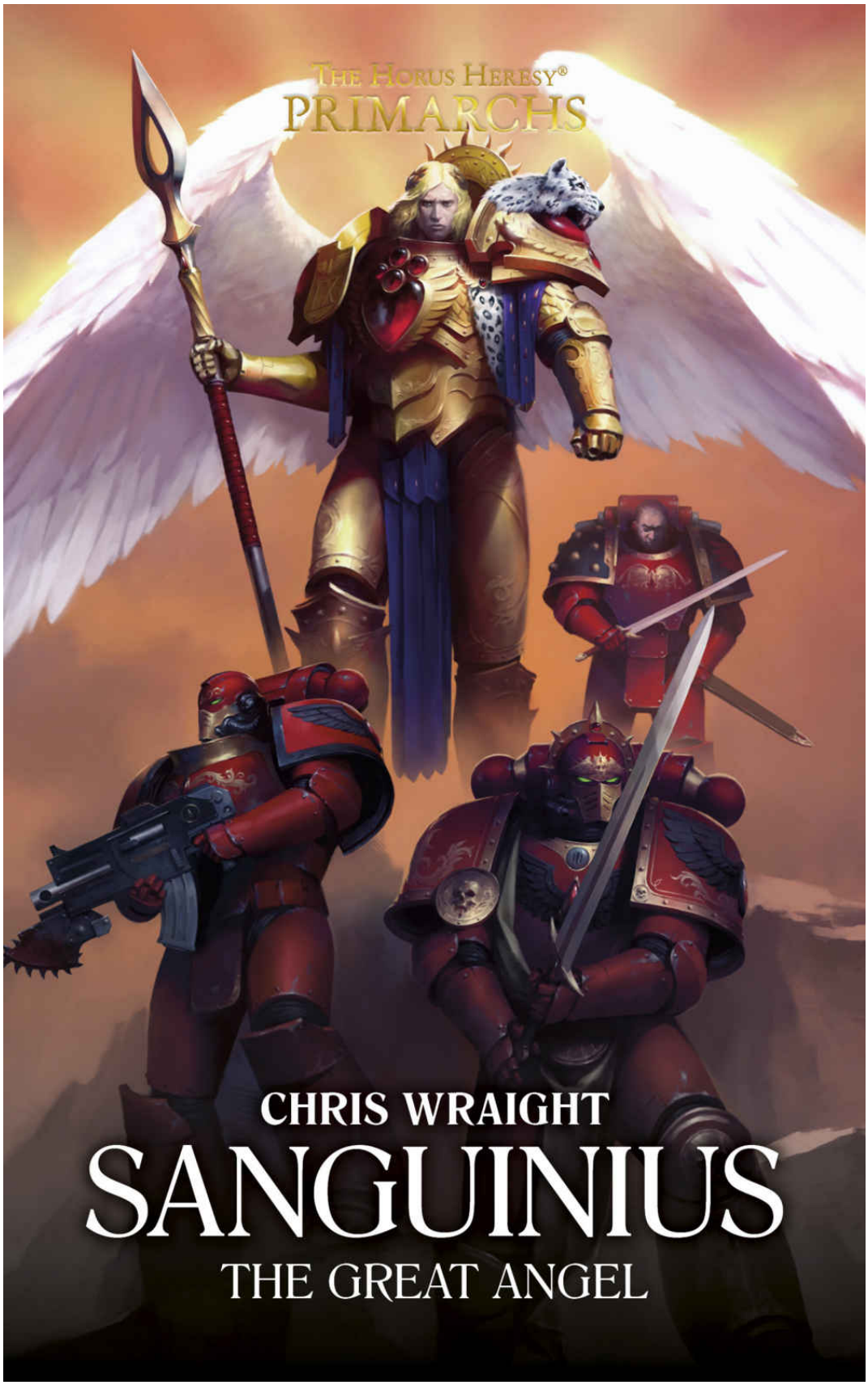
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CONTENTS

Cover
Backlist
The Horus Heresy
Sanguinius : The Great Angel
Prologue
One
Two
Three
Four
Five
Six
Seven
Eight
Nine
Ten
Eleven
Twelve
Thirteen
Fourteen
Epilogue
About the Author
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PROLOGUE

Now he was running, properly sprinting down the corridors. The floors were already filthy. Everything seemed to be filthy, all the time. Weren't there servitors to handle all that? To scrub the stone and scrape at the windows? No one seemed to care. For all the frantic building going on now, all the mad rush to create greater and more ostentatious towers, the little things weren't being done any more.

But why was he worrying about that? Why did his mind wander all the time? A weakness, that. Something every master who had ever schooled him had tried to improve.

Stick to the task at hand. *Stick to the task at hand.*

This was a sacred duty, after all. A divine duty. He was lucky. He'd been given secrets that millions of others would have killed for. Some had tried it before. Knives in the dark, poison pills in the ceremonial wine. It was a vicious place, this world. This Imperium. Nests upon nests of serpents, all writhing into and out of one another, fangs poised to bite.

He'd lasted this long. That was already something to be thankful for. He'd been faithful, he'd been diligent, he'd been *careful*. That was why they gave him tasks like this. They trusted him. They liked him.

He ran on. His heavy robes flapped against his legs, his breathing became wheezing. He could really do with a sit down, some wine and a sucrose

wafer or two. The augmetic loop stitched under his right cheek itched painfully, and he resisted the urge to reach up and feel the weals where the input jacks chafed. Candles guttered as he raced past them; servo-skulls whizzed the other way, chattering to themselves with that weird mix of clicks and bleeps that meant nothing much to anyone but the tech-priests.

He skidded past a high window, thickly glazed and mullioned with lead veins. He got a brief glimpse of the world outside this mouldering warren. He saw the towers, the old ones that still bore the scars of war, the new ones going up everywhere, enfolded in scaffolding like vast cobwebs. They had been erecting some of those towers since before he was born. More were started every month. Where did they get the rockcrete from? Where did they get the steel and the adamantium and the granite? They couldn't mine it here – it must be coming in from off-world. But so much! Maybe there were entire fleets that carried it over. Maybe whole sectors devoted to–

Stick to the task. Stick to the task.

He reached a heavy metal door, placed his hand on the ident panel, heard the lock slip open. He pushed at it, and it eased inward on rusty hinges. Everything was already rusty.

The chamber beyond was very dark. A servitor looked up at him from the shadows, its grey face withered like old leather. He ignored it, pushed on, brushing his sleeves against piles of books. He could smell the age of this room. Maybe a hundred years. Maybe more than a hundred. Some of these places were *centuries* old, they told him, built in the very first days of the Great Reconstruction. It was hard to even imagine structures that ancient.

Then again, it might all be lies. He'd begun to suspect that many of those in positions of authority didn't know half as much as they pretended to. Getting ahead was a matter of saying the right things, thinking the right things, forgetting the secrets too dangerous to know.

Had it always been like that? Probably. People didn't change much.

A cowled scholar was busy working away at a desk in the chamber's corner. Her scribe-station was lit with a single candle. The woman's shadowed cheek was dominated by a grotesque augmetic across one brow that whirred and focused. She was bent double over sheets of parchment and holding an auto-quill.

'I need an archive pass,' he told her.

The scholar looked up slowly, still writing. All he could clearly see of her face was a pointed chin with a prominent mole; the rest was in the shadow

of her thick cowl and that augmetic focuser.

‘What level?’

‘B-Xsis-Veridium.’

She smirked. ‘No chance.’

‘I *need* it.’

The auto-quill paused. ‘How much?’

He began to panic. Time was running out. Why had *he* been sent for this? Wasn’t there anyone else?

‘My stipend for this month,’ he said, grudgingly.

She pondered for a moment, then rummaged in a drawer and withdrew a palm-sized slab of steel inscribed with various lock-runes. ‘Get it transferred quickly. They’re monitoring everything down here like hawks.’

‘Because of the New Feast?’ he asked, taking the slab.

‘Of course. Who sent you down here for this?’

He couldn’t tell her. It was very important that he didn’t tell her. Of all the things he had to remember, that was the most important one. ‘It’ll be done quick. Oh, and I wasn’t here.’

‘I wish you weren’t.’

He scuttled off, the slab clutched in his sweaty palms. Out of the chamber and down, skipping spiral stairs and even gloomier shadows. Deeper and deeper, where only the lower-level store servitors and guard cherubs prowled. You could get spooked down here, have an attack of the jitters. It smelled of bones and rotting parchment, of old secrets and dangerous truths. If he’d had time, he’d have paused at some of the cubbyholes and parchment racks. He’d have taken his time looking through them all, hunting for juicy titbits from the dimly recalled past. These were *primary sources.* These were the accounts that no one had tampered with yet or seen fit to drop into an incinerator.

He didn’t do any of that. He scampered deeper, clutching the reference marker he’d been given. He glanced up at every intersection, scrutinised the lozenges over the archways. When he found the archive chamber he needed, he hurried inside, ran a quick auspex sweep, scuttled over to the storage racks.

It didn’t take long to find. He pushed the lock-rune slab into its slot, hauled the heavy casket door open. A sigh of stale air wafted out at him, internal lumens flickered on.

He stared at the contents. A lead box, heavy looking, but he'd be able to carry it. The box was mottled with rust and covered in a thick layer of dust. He reached for it, dragged it into the open.

He'd been told not to open the box. That had been made very clear to him. But the locks on it were manually operated, the kind of thing he could open, then reseal and no one would know. He ran his thumb over the mechanism, pressing gently. It didn't yield. He'd have to push it hard to open it.

He held back, drawing in a worried breath.

He looked over his shoulder. No one there. Not even a servo-skull.

He looked back at the box.

He needed to get back now. Time was pressing.

But this would be the only chance he'd get.

He looked at the box.

Stick to the task.

Fingers trembling, he reached for the lock.

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ONE

I was not a cynic about it all. Not then, and not now. Neither, though, was I entirely convinced. I had my doubts.

You could be like that, in those days – some of the time at least, if you were careful, walking that tightrope of maybe/maybe not. Don't mistake it for original thought; I just had difficulty making up my mind. Lack of sleep had a part to play. Throne, I wish I'd learned to sleep, and not to dream so much when I did. You can never be entirely happy, never be entirely settled, if you're exhausted all the time.

I shouldn't complain. I've seen things beyond imagination. I've been across the galaxy and back, and survived to put some of what I saw to parchment. I was – *am* – lucky, by any measure.

And it was doubt, in the end, that turned me into what I am. Writers have a reputation for arrogance – for manipulation and self-regard. Maybe some are like that, but I don't think many are. We're all a bag of contradictions, of worries and obsessions and changes-of-mind. We can't cope with too much reality, because we struggle with how messy and difficult it is already, so we invent our own worlds, try to make them stable, as if we could somehow retreat inside them and live there undisturbed.

We can't, of course. We're stuck with the real world, and every time we put our pens down it's right there still, waiting for us.

I wish it were better. I wish it were simpler, with good and evil, yes and no, right and wrong. If it were, though, if it *really* were, what would layabouts like me do for our coin? Who would need interpreters and storytellers and myth-makers, if the world were already straightforward?

So there's always a qualification, if you look hard enough. Always a reason to second-guess yourself.

I travelled to meet Judita Widera, and it took a long time. Four warp-stages, three different ships. The passage was difficult, and gave me a queasy stomach, but apart from the obvious difficulties I didn't really mind it. No one else gets any sleep in the warp, which at least puts us all on an equal footing.

I should have used the time to prepare, or maybe reflect on what missed chances and random luck had brought me to such a strange pass, but I didn't. The food was pretty good on Imperial Army cruisers, and there was plenty of it. All the ships were well run, with captains that either ignored me or appeared interested in what I did, so I didn't have any problems. I had a lot of free time, and nothing much to do but eat and rest up, which suited me fine.

It couldn't last. As I drew nearer my destination – the big Naval station at Ashallon – I knew it would all start to gear up again. I'd been given a chance, and I was aware just how precious it was, but the responsibilities would ramp up quickly, risking putting me back into that awful state that made working impossible.

The black swamp, I called it. The mental sluggishness, the crushing weight of expectation, the freezing of any kind of inspiration just in case someone out there, anyone at all, hated what I did.

Ah, there I go again – moan, moan. I was selfish then, when billions were fighting and dying all around us to create the future, and now, given what happened afterwards, I feel even more of a heel. But we can't all be soldiers, can we? I mean, He Himself thought we were important. That's why He sent us out with the fleets – the scribblers and the scrawlers, tolerated for as long as we gave posterity something.

Remembrancer. Great title. I liked it, and took pride in it, even if I hadn't done anything at that point remotely deserving of it.

Widera was a remembrancer too, though not a fingernail-chewing nerve-bag writer like me. She was a painter and an imagist. I'd seen some of her stuff back on Hydra Celsis, just when I was coming out of my last

monumental mind-sulk, and had liked it. Clever depictions, hovering on the edge of figurative, but skilfully done. I didn't love it, though. A bit too clever, if you know what I mean. A bit too knowing, as if it were more about pleasing the client than having a difficult vision.

But what did I know? I'm not a critic, and I paint about as well as I fire a lasgun. She'd got cachet and contacts, which meant she knew much more than I did. She was probably a genius.

We docked at Ashallon and I walked down the umbilicals feeling the flaky grav-pull of the decks replaced with the firmer one of an orbital station. I took a look out of some narrow realviewers and caught sight of a large world revolving far below, lurid orange pocked with the black scars of major settlements. Everyone around me seemed to be in uniform – deck-grade armsmen, Army officers, transit officials. Who made all those uniforms? I wondered. There must have been trillions of them out there, in all shapes and sizes. Did entire planets pump them out? Who designed them? Surely He hadn't – despite what the iterators banged on about, He couldn't have been responsible for *everything.* And yet, the way we all looked back then was important. It gave us our identity, made us part of the crusade, so someone must have had eyes on it.

They were smarter than me, at any rate. I was overweight, out of condition. My robes felt sweaty from waiting in the transition chambers, and I wished I'd shaved better. Hurrying past all those crisp-pressed jerkins and polished breastplates made me feel like a vagrant somehow hurled up out of a hive-sump.

I make more coin than any of them, I told myself, to try to make myself feel better. At least, I would do, if I delivered this time.

It took me a long time to locate Widera's chamber. By the time I got there I was sweatier than ever. I knew how to make a good first impression – the doors slid open while I was still trying to straighten my neck scarf. She smiled knowingly, beckoned me in, showed me a chair, poured us both a drink. From that point onward, things got better.

She looked older than I'd thought she'd be. I hadn't expected her to resemble her ident-images, taken years ago probably, but all the same – a long time on campaign clearly took its toll. For all that, she was neat, well groomed, physically fit. I guessed she was around fifty, standard Terran, so with appropriate rejuvenat she was nowhere close to the end of her career.

She had blue eyes, olive skin, silver hair in a bun, and wore a high-collared trouser suit.

‘Avajis Kautenya,’ she said to me, doing a decent job of pronouncing my name. ‘On time, too.’

‘You didn’t expect that?’

‘I didn’t know if you’d come at all.’

‘It was a good offer. I don’t get so many, these days.’

‘That’s a shame.’

Was it? Or did I thoroughly deserve my expulsion from the limelight? Even I couldn’t decide, and I knew more about the circumstances than most.

‘I still don’t know why you got in touch,’ I said. ‘If I’m honest.’

Widera continued to regard me with calm amusement. Her expression was part tolerant, part resigned. I felt as if my mother had been talking to her somehow, and had passed on all her low-level irritation at my frequent calamities. ‘Because I read it,’ she said.

‘Oh, you read it.’

‘I’d meant to read it before I’d even signed up, but never had the time. And then there was a copy in the fleet’s archives.’

‘Improbable.’

‘You’d be surprised what you can find on a Legion warship.’

And then there was the question, the one I always wanted to ask, but never wanted to ask, but had to ask, because… well, you had to. ‘So what did you think?’

Widera sat back in her chair, crossed her legs. ‘I can see why it got you in trouble. And I can see why you didn’t follow it up with… anything much. When I paint something important, it can take a while to get back up there again. So maybe it’s something similar with you.’

I doubted that. How long did it take to paint a picture? A few hours? A day or two? Writing a book – a serious book – that was months out of a life.

‘Probably, yes,’ I said. ‘So you liked it?’ Throne, I was needy.

She laughed. ‘You want me to tell you it was brilliant? That you never deserved what happened next?’ She carried on looking amused. ‘It was very good. But you know that. I didn’t seek you out to flatter you. The Ninth Legion’s deeds aren’t being chronicled. The primarch’s aren’t. You’d think in this Imperium of a million worlds that wordsmiths capable of turning in something decent and accurate would be like switch-valves on a forge

world. But they aren't, and the war makes it difficult, and we were running out of time. So that's that.'

I raised an eyebrow in what I hoped was a calmly interested way, but probably made my already lopsided face look idiotic. 'Running out of time?'

'Of course. We're nearly done here. You know that.' I must have looked blank, as a flicker of exasperation crossed her face. 'How many worlds are left to conquer? How long before we all head back to Terra and take stock of what we've done? We have a Warmaster now. We have the edge of the known void within sight. It can't go on forever.'

No one had ever put it to me like that before. A part of me, I suppose, had assumed that it *would* go on forever. Or for decades more, at least. We had all been born in the Crusade Age. We knew nothing else. What was supposed to come afterwards?

I immediately felt unschooled and stupid. Widera had been out with the Legions long enough to know all about galactic politics – the great schemes played by our immortal masters and their terror-troop servants. Perhaps I was in over my head. Perhaps my first work had been a one-off, a lucky strike, something I wasn't clever enough or hard-working enough to ever achieve again.

But I was here now. No going back. Either I bluffed and brazened my way forward, just as I had always done before, or I might as well have skipped out of an airlock.

'Yes, yes,' I said. 'That's the big picture. I thought you were referring to the immediate mission.'

'Ah, no. There's no great hurry about that. We've got a week or two until we start, most of that transit, so you can get your bearings.'

'I meant to ask you about that – where to? No one in the Navy would give me an expeditionary fleet location reading.'

'Because there isn't one. Not yet. It's why I wanted you out here, in the Red Scar, so you could see where it all starts for them.'

I had wondered about that. Part of me had hoped for it, the other half dreading it – we all knew the stories. 'Then we're headed for–'

Widera smiled again, now obviously enjoying my discomfort.

'Quite so, Ser Kautenya,' she said. 'You should start preparing yourself now. Baal is no place for the unwary.'

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TWO

We had many opportunities to talk during the onward passage. It wasn't taken in a Legion ship – those were in demand for the real business of war – but it had indications of links to them. Its outer hull was rust-red, and the interior spaces were more ornate than I was used to. It was the little things that stood out: the polished bronze finials on the stairwell railings, the glass-panelled lanterns hanging in place of raw lumen-tubes. They cared about how things looked, and I liked that, having spent too long on stripped-down, battle-ready Army cruisers.

The crew were entirely human, by which I mean there were no Space Marines among them. Widera told me most of those serving were Baalite, which interested me. They didn't look very far out of the ordinary. I'd thought some of them might have two heads or fifteen fingers, but I couldn't see much sign of mutation. Maybe, I thought, they'd fixed the rad-poisoning, which was pretty much the only thing I knew about the Baal System besides the fact that it produced Blood Angels. They were polite enough, and spoke in a way that I could understand, and seemed reasonably content with their lot. Plenty had very pale skin, but then working on a voidship could do that, greying out even the darkest of complexions due to lack of natural sunlight.

I tried to make myself useful. I tried to eat a bit less, and get at least some sleep. I took some notes, but not many, because I still had no idea what I was expected to be producing. A chronology of their actions? Better to get a historian for that. Propaganda for the crusade? An iterator would have been preferable. I'd made my reputation – such as it was – on flimsier foundations. People. Characters. Flaws and gossip.

I worked hard not to let my doubts show too clearly. Widera seemed happy enough with how things were going whenever we met, which was at the end of the final diurnal watch, most cycles. We'd eat in one of the officers' refectories, surrounded by the hum of conversation and the clatter of metal trays, ignored by everyone else.

'You'll meet him, of course,' she told me. 'I want you to meet him soon.'

That made my stomach twinge. A primarch. I'd heard about them, written about them, but never met one. Of course I hadn't. No one normal met a primarch.

'What's he like?' I asked.

What's he like? Hells, what a stupid question. The worst kind of question.

Widera sat back in her chair, drumming a finger idly on the tabletop. 'Oh, then,' she said. 'Now you're asking.'

I wondered if she were trying to faze me, build it all up so I'd lose what little remained of my composure, but I don't think she was. There was a genuine look of almost… *rapture* on her face. Like someone trying to convince you that something was beautiful or precious or outstanding and struggling to find the words.

'I mean, ignore the wings,' she said. 'If you can. They're the most striking thing about him, but they're not the most important.'

'Ignore the wings.'

'His Legion does. They're tolerant of physical variation. They've had to be. And it's just another weapon, really – another power he has.'

'But… it shouldn't be–'

'Possible. I know. But it's there, they exist. If you just stare at them, make something of it, you'll insult him.'

'I don't want to do that.'

'He might like you. He's kind. At least, some of the time he is. Surprisingly so, given what he has to do. He's patient, and intelligent. Extremely intelligent. I wouldn't try to match wits with him.'

'I wasn't planning to.'

‘He doesn’t respect weakness, though. None of them do. They come from a hard world. They dismiss anything that can’t match up.’

‘Great.’

‘Just look them in the eye. They care about the way you carry yourself. So clean up, lift your chin. How much do you know about the Legion history?’

‘Some. I mean, plenty’s still classified.’

‘For a reason. They had a troubled past. But it’s over, and they’re an exemplar now, not something to be ashamed about.’

I didn’t know there had ever been shame. All I knew, at that point, was the old, broad-strokes account – that the Legion had been under-strength and had underperformed before they’d discovered the primarch. He’d remade them, boosted the numbers, improved morale, and now the Ninth were paragons, among the very best of the Emperor’s elite, spoken of in the same breath as the Luna Wolves and the Ultramarines.

I was so very ignorant then. I had no idea just what creatures the Legiones Astartes were, least of all what a primarch was. Had I done so, maybe I would have bailed, run back to Ashallon in fresh disgrace, but I couldn’t – we were in the warp, hurtling towards my appointment with these people, and I only had myself to blame.

‘Ignorance is a virtue, in my line of work,’ I said. ‘I want to get first impressions, have no preconceptions. Start from scratch.’

Widera smirked. ‘Is it, now?’ she said, finishing her food and pushing the tray away. ‘Then I’ll expect the finished product to be worth the wait. But if you fancy filling in some gaps, just in case, there are vid-books in the ship’s library.’ She got up. ‘Think about looking at some. We’re going to a dangerous place.’

I did that. I researched what I could. I’m not sure how helpful it was – so much of what I could find was censored or just rehashes of the propaganda we’d all seen on the crusade update reels. The Angels of Blood, splendid gold-and-red warriors of the Emperor’s glorious vision, the harbingers of a new age of fulfilment and progress.

They looked the part, I had to admit. Even when they were viewed on tiny screens, you could see how imposing they must be on the battlefield. The crimson armour was statement enough: hard to conceal, decorated richly, a gauntlet thrown down to their enemies.

We’re not hiding. We’re in full view. And we’re coming for you.

I couldn’t concentrate. I’d lie in my bunk during the nominal noctis-watches, staring at the embellished ceiling and listening to the creaking of the decks. I’d pray for sleep, before remembering that we weren’t allowed to pray any more. Pills didn’t help – when I got like this, the only solution was to escape, to run away and forget about what I was supposed to be doing, and that was the one thing I couldn’t do now. I felt trapped, hemmed in by vicious giants in ceramic-alloy armour, and I hadn’t even met them yet.

As I dozed fitfully, I thought of their master. I wondered just what the wings would look like, and how I would avoid staring at them. I wondered how a prosecutor of the greatest war to be launched by our species could ever be *kind.* I wondered how I would keep my chin up when I met him, avoid stammering and making a fool of myself.

They must have had blood vessels and sweat glands. The primarchs. Hells, they must have defecated. Did they? Did they ever stumble over their words, miss a step, belch by accident? That wouldn’t have ended up in the propaganda reels, but still – they were partly, mostly, human. Weren’t they?

In the few hours of proper sleep I got, I’d see him there, hovering above me in a mist of red, smiling benignly at me, blond ringlets floating in a soft wind. I’d try to apologise, to tell him that I didn’t really know how I’d ended up in this position, and he’d reach out with a single finger and bring my prattling to a halt. He’d tell me he understood. He’d tell me that I was a gifted soul, that I’d merely been unlucky in the past. And then he’d show me what he was planning, and take me into his confidence, and I would start to write again, words spilling out, and all would be glory and satisfaction.

I would wake up, flushed and clammy, and I’d be in that cramped hold on my own. It would all be ludicrous.

He wasn’t some saint, some superstitious icon to be pawed at and prayed to. He was a man. Or something like a man. He was a master tactician and strategist whose conquests deserved to be chronicled. I was there to perform a service. I just didn’t know if I could do it.

It was a relief, then, as well as a cause for fresh anxiety, when we dropped out of the warp at last. I felt the withdrawal of the Geller aegis, and took a deep breath, as if that transition had somehow made the air on board fresher.

Widera summoned me up to the main observation deck for the run into the Baal System's inner core. The warp shutters furled up, exposing high arches spanned by thick armaglass panes. I stood next to her on the marble deck, blinking as the interior filled up with reddish light.

The void wasn't black here. It was almost black, but not quite, like an old scab that was close to healing. The red glow filled it up, made it look more solid than it was, like a thick soup of corpuscles.

As we neared the planet itself, I saw more ships. Hundreds of them. They swam alongside us, tilting and sidling before darting off again. Some were in the full livery of the Blood Angels, some in the colours of their Imperial Army auxiliaries – corvettes, cruisers, system-runners, monitors, even full battleships, all sliding towards the looming orb at the base of the well. Their lights were jewels, part masked by the ruby fog, blinking and strobing among the heavy armour plates and sensor vanes.

'Throne,' I murmured. I'd never seen so many gathered so close together.

'A beautiful thing,' said Widera. 'You don't realise how powerful they are, until you see their fleets being mustered.'

I'd been raised on tales of the inevitability of human victory against the xenos. I'd always taken them with a pinch of salt, but I could start to believe it, seeing all that. We drifted close, at one stage, to a proper line warship, one with a prow-mounted cannon that defied belief – our little craft might have slipped inside the muzzle without much trouble.

'You paint those things?' I asked.

'Not really my line,' said Widera. 'Naval artists make some coin doing it, but they're ugly things. Even when the Ninth get hold of them, and they do their best to spruce them up.'

I'd heard that, too, and now I could see it for myself. All of the Legion ships were resplendent, with gold-plated prows and gleaming towers. It must have taken vast effort to make them that way, especially as they were virtually always at war.

'What's the reason for this?' I asked.

'The muster? The council's over. Nikaea. You know about that? It's changed a lot. And the Warmaster's been chosen too. So, plenty to digest before they set off again.' Her eyes remained fixed on the viewports, watching the choreography of void-hulls with undisguised admiration. 'This is a major gathering, a major summit. All in all, an ideal time for you to join us.'

I looked past the bulk of the carriers and cruisers, and focused on our destination. It was a red world, vibrant, a crescent of saturated pigment against the darkness of the abyss. Two moons hung above it, both shining vividly. Colossal void-port facilities had been constructed over both of those orbs – splayed constellations of iron and plasteel that glowed with webs of sulphur-yellow light. The space between was congested with lesser craft beetling back and forth between landing stages. I couldn't even begin to count them. The complexity staggered me. It looked like an entire planetary system had been somehow animated, brought to scuttling, frantic life. And this was only one of eighteen active Legions, all of whom – I assumed – had access to similar resources.

'Amazing,' I breathed, out loud.

Widera laughed. 'Not even their full complement. I don't know if they've ever been assembled in their entirety. Imagine *that*, if you can.'

I couldn't. It was beyond me. I felt very, very small. 'He's on one of those ships?' I asked.

'No idea. I doubt it. We'll be making our landing on Baal Primus. But the centre of operations is on Baal proper. You've read the briefings on the grav-load?'

I'd meant to. 'Yes.'

'Then you know what to do.' Something caught her eye. 'Oh, Throne of Unity – look at that. It's the *Tear*.'

I followed her outstretched finger, and saw something gigantic moored a long way off, almost over Baal's night-dark horizon. At first I thought it might be a third natural satellite, until the sigils of the Legion were caught by the sullen glow of the system's sun.

Widera was wrong – it was a true thing of beauty. Somehow, running hard against the grain, this primarch had fashioned a jewel among war vessels, a cathedral in the void. It looked to me then, as its turrets drifted over the terminator, like some kind of vast reliquary, a casket for ancient and cherished jewels, only reluctantly encrusted with weapons of destruction and sent out to hurl fire at the species' enemies.

'What do you think?' Widera asked me.

I couldn't take my eyes off it. I suddenly wished I had an auto-quill with me.

'That I'm getting my imagination back,' I said.

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THREE

It took a long time to get clearance for landfall. A very long time. Ours was a small ship, not even a proper warship, and so I guessed we had to wait in turn before we got to the head of the queue. After a few hours of hanging around, even the appeal of staring at those glittering ship formations waned, so I went back to my chamber to check on the status of my few personal effects.

I felt a mix of excitement and nerves. I'd written things about the crusade before – satirical, some of them, before the censors got hold of them. I'd fancied that I knew something about it. Its follies. Its hubris. But this was the first time I'd really witnessed anything about it up close, and I now wondered if I'd got it all wrong. It wouldn't have been the first time.

In any case, my appetite had been whetted. I wanted to get among them now, to start studying them, taking down character descriptions, thinking about what I'd produce for them. When the chimes finally came to board the landers, I virtually trotted to the elevator shafts. The carry-cages clattered down to the hangars, where several dozen of us – mostly military personnel and Legion serfs – were waiting. Widera was going down in a different craft, they told me, so I boarded the lander by myself. I took my place wedged between a woman in a Baalite uniform of some kind and an

Imperial Army captain with a thick black beard spilling out from under his helm. Neither of them wanted to talk to me, so I settled back for the drop.

It was as unpleasant as ever – a hard lurch as the void-doors below cantilevered, followed by that whistling plummet into zero-grav that felt like every blood cell in your body was being reorganised. I screwed my eyes shut for the transition through the true void, then opened them again as we smacked into the upper atmosphere and started juddering around against the restraints.

So I got my first glimpse of Baal Primus as it swooped up close. It didn't last long – an orbital drop is over very quickly – but I had a good view of bleak salt flats, glistening white and ringed by low ridges of exposed rock. I saw settlements sprawling up against the shoulders of a jumbled massif, like littoral ports set against a static sea of crystals, all of it bathed in the pale rose glow of Baal's ancient sun.

It looked remarkably undeveloped, at least compared to the gigantic cities-in-space I'd seen on the way in. The open expanse was little more than a wasteland with a scattering of buildings around its fringes. Otherwise, nothing. How many lived down there? The population must have been minuscule compared to what the void-stations were capable of housing.

Then the view was lost in a roaring boom of re-entry, followed soon afterwards by the heavy crunch to earth. I swallowed down a thick gobbet of saliva, clenched and unclenched my fists, and pulled in a long breath. The lander's doors clunked open, letting in a wedge of red light. I took my first breath of Baalite air, and tasted its dryness on my tongue. I'd taken the prescribed anti-rad pills, which dulled the senses apparently, but the aromas that flooded into the passenger compartment were complex: the tang of salt, unfamiliar vegetation, a lingering undernote of chems. I saw a salmon-pink sky, shaking with heat, and ochre earth under it.

We unstrapped and disembarked. I hobbled towards the gang-ramps, feeling my out-of-condition muscles complain. Most of the other occupants had places to go. I looked around myself uncertainly, wondering where Widera was. My robes flapped in the hot wind, and I felt grit blow into my eyes.

'Ser Kautenya?' came a voice at my shoulder.

I turned to see a woman looking at me. She wore Legion colours – blood-red, trimmed with gold. Her face was pale, her eyes dark. She was slim and

short, as most Baalites were in my limited experience. I knew about the old wars, of course. The old scars hadn't all healed up.

'That's me,' I said.

'Legion-Auxilia Commander Olixa Eris. You are expected. Will you follow me, please?'

I did so. We walked together past rows of personnel carriers, slipping our way through the crowds. Everything was in motion, everything was busy. Much further off, where the void port's structures reared up higher, far bigger vessels were coming down and taking off, each one stuffed with troops or supplies. I looked up and spied the pale dots of the low-orbit battle cruisers. The complexity of it all was daunting.

'How long will all this go on?' I asked Eris.

She never turned her head, just kept walking. 'Two weeks only,' she said. 'We're operating ahead of schedule.'

I could imagine that. Every movement around me was precise, coordinated, a vast and intricate chronometer operating at full tilt. We moved from the landing stages and entered a series of tunnels bored into the ridge running around their south-eastern perimeter. These were machine-tooled spaces, well built and spacious. Suspensors floated under high ceilings illuminating frescoes set into the bare rock walls.

We reached an ornate doorway carved into sandstone, framed with mosaics and smelling of incense. Two bronze-lined lamps burned overhead, throwing warm light across the tiles. Eris gestured for me to enter alone.

'Not coming in?' I asked.

'I was instructed to deliver you.' The half-flicker of a smile darted across her grey lips. 'Be respectful.'

And then she was gone. I didn't know what to make of that. I was always respectful. Wasn't I?

I knocked on the door. No answer. I waited for a few moments, knocked again, then pushed it open.

I still remember the shock of what I found inside. You never quite get desensitised to it – the presence, the physicality, especially when confined with it, up close, right in your face. And that's strange, because now I've seen them fight on other worlds, in formations, in *huge* formations, and it's still never been quite like it was that first time. Because they're mutants, really. Mutants. They've been changed, and they're *wrong*. Bulked up out of all recognition, made far too big for a human frame, far too broad and

over-muscled. They sound wrong, and they smell wrong – their voices well up from those gigantic chests, their various implanted organs do things to their biochemistry. It feels like you've stumbled into some nightmare lab with a specimen still on the table, only now it's talking and looking at you and expecting you to treat it like it's just another human. But it isn't.

That was my first impression, scored onto my naive mind beyond hope of erasure, but my second one was how beautiful he was. Not in a sexual or a romantic sense, but in a kind of idealised human capacity, like one of those marble statues I'd seen in the vid-histories of old Europa: cold, pure; every limb in proportion and every gaze frigid and imperious. I looked up – a long way up – into ice-blue eyes set into a face the colour of sun-warmed leather. I saw blond hair over a high forehead, and a mouth that could have been cruel had it not been so artful. I saw the heavy plates of armour, dimly lit by candles, each curve adorned with a fine crust of ingenious decoration.

He wasn't even looking at me. He was standing in the centre of the circular chamber, totally alone, in that suit of power armour that made him even more colossal than he already was. He was surrounded by a range of hololith projections. Four? Five? I don't remember exactly, but enough that he shouldn't have been able to process them all in one go. Each lithcast was fearsomely complex, showing ship dispositions and troop movements and Throne knows what else swinging around between the moons and the planet and the near void-volume. And he never really stopped paying attention to the diagrams, even when he noticed me come in and motioned for me to stand in front of him. Every so often, his finger would twitch or a series of lights at his exposed armour-collar would blink, and I'd guess some order had been given, and now some garrison ship was diverted to another sector, or some arms consignment was sent back to the holding pens, or some promotion or demotion or diversion had just taken place in one of the several hundred active deployments and musters.

'You are Avajis Kautenya,' the Space Marine said. 'The new remembrancer.'

'I am.'

'You will be under my supervision while you are with us. You will come to me if you require anything. Any queries concerning your work, what you are permitted to do and what you are not, come to me.'

He wasn't bothering to hide his contempt for me or this meeting. I couldn't blame him. He had been bred for combat, for the orchestration of

hyperviolence in ways I couldn't even hope to imagine, and he really didn't want to be talking to me at all. I wish I could say that I let the disdain wash over me, but I didn't. I was very scared; I felt incredibly vulnerable. A large part of me just wanted to run straight out, find a transport and get the hell off-world.

And, worst of all, I already wanted him to like me. Which was insane. But you have to understand this about people in my profession – we can't stand not to be liked. It gnaws away at us. Everything depends on that, to one degree or another. We tell stories, we deliver our products, and then we have to have the applause, or all the effort was worse than doing nothing. At some stage, this… person would be reading what I produced. All of them would. These would be my critics.

'My name is Bel Sepatus, of the Keruvim Host of the First Sphere of the Legion,' he went on, his flawless eyes darting ably from one hololith to the other. 'I will be stationed on the *Red Tear* for the transition, as will you. Do you require anything else at this stage?'

I knew what some of those words meant. Not all of them. I didn't need to, really – I could see with my own eyes that he was an order above me, beyond anything I'd ever seen before, and the precise ranks mattered very little. I needed to go away and do some research. I needed to understand all the strange permutations of this alien empire, or they'd eat me alive. My palms were already so damp that I feared I'd leave drops on the floor behind me. I should have worked harder. Damn it, I should have studied those vid-books until my eyes bled.

'No, my lord,' I stammered. 'But thanks.'

He gave me a brief, cold glare. 'Then the audience shall be as arranged. Two days hence, in the fortress. Instructions will be sent to you.'

I must have gulped. Literally, gulped. 'Audience?' I asked, stupidly.

Bel Sepatus returned to his scrutiny of the fleet.

'With the primarch,' he said, flatly. 'Throne only knows why, but he wants to meet you.'

After that, Eris came back for me. We walked up several levels until we were at the parapet of the rock fortress, looking out over a whole series of landing fields and muster grounds. Behind us rose the greater mass of the settlement. It was a city built partially underground, delved deep and with relatively little visible beyond the sandstone scarps. That made sense, I guessed. Whatever wars had ravaged this place in the distant past, it had left

a race memory behind. Keep low. Bury yourself. Do not show yourself to the sun.

I leaned on a stone railing. Eris looked at me.

‘I have orders to show you to your quarters,’ she said.

I stared out across scenes of military preparation. I could see the salt flats in the distance, glistening under the oppressive red glow. I had visited a number of worlds of the Imperium before, and each had had their unique qualities. This one felt the strangest of all. I could almost taste the hostility to life when I breathed in, as if the entire place were hissing curses at me the whole time. It wasn’t an overt thing but something residual, like a phage still active in the soils.

‘You work for him?’ I asked, wishing I had a lho-stick to drag on.

‘I work for the Legion.’

‘Gods. Why?’

Eris laughed out loud at me, before she realised I was serious. Then she just looked confused.

Of course she looked confused. She didn’t have choices in her life. Almost nobody in the Imperium, even then, had choices. Only scraggy losers like me had choices, and that made us lazy and querulous. To ask her why she served the Legion… I might as well have asked her why she chose to breathe.

‘You don’t know much about this world, do you?’ she said.

‘I don’t,’ I admitted.

Eris looked out over the same scene. Her eyes narrowed against the glare. ‘We were dead,’ she said. ‘Almost, anyway. Clinging on. Right at the edge of creation, condemned by wars fought long before any of us were born. And then… he came.’

‘The Angel.’

‘You will meet him soon. I envy you. I’d kill for a chance of the same, if they let me.’ She grinned at me, but I saw a flash of genuine jealousy there. ‘He lifted us up. Those of the Blood, and those that came later. He lifted us both up, creating something new. Better. A fusion that became beautiful.’

Bel Sepatus had been beautiful, true. Undeniably. ‘Angels were never meant to be beautiful,’ I said. ‘They were messengers. What’s his message?’

‘That the terror can be defeated.’

I wrinkled my brow. ‘I don’t see any terror.’

‘Oh, it’s there. I could take you out to the sand and show you.’

‘Sure.’ I twisted around to look at her. ‘I’d prefer a drink. Anywhere I could get one?’

‘You have better things to do.’

‘I really don’t. I’m out of my depth, and I need to learn fast. I’ll listen. I’ll buy. All you need to do is talk.’

She looked at me for a long time, and I could tell she was trying to decide if I was making fun of her. But I wasn’t. I felt vaguely sick already, and I guessed something in the compromised airs of this place was getting to me – I’d never had a strong constitution. I had to get up to speed, to soak up knowledge, so that if I ever made it to meet this damned Angel then I’d at least have something to say to him.

‘I have my duties,’ she said.

‘To look after me,’ I said. ‘That’s it, yes? Come on. I’ve got the coin.’

This woman was dangerous. She was fit, and trained, and could kill me very easily. But then she was no doubt surrounded by serious, capable people all the time, and that could surely get boring.

‘In your line of work?’ she asked, doubtfully.

‘Absolutely.’

I hadn’t fooled her – her smirk told me that.

‘Follow me, then,’ she said, pushing back from the parapet.

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FOUR

So I discovered that alcohol existed on Baal Primus. Powerful stuff it was, too – I woke up after the first night with Eris feeling like my head had been pickled in acid. Plenty of the military staff there drank hard, both natives and off-worlders alike. That wasn't unusual for an Army installation, but I'd wondered if the Legions were any different.

At one point during the long evening, I'd seen a menial carrying a large decanter filled with ruby-red liquid. Eris saw me looking at it.

'Don't even think about it,' she'd said.

'Why not?'

'It's *karash.*'

'And that is…?'

'Not for you.'

The next two days went very fast, despite my hammering temples and blurred vision. Whenever I grabbed some sleep, I dreamed vividly. Always of him, suffused in a haze of gold and ivory, his flesh flawless, his gaze serene. I was trying to talk to him, tripping over my words, making a fool of myself, and still he remained, impossibly beautiful, tolerant, patient. Stupid dreams. But they were very striking, more memorable when I woke than most dreams I had. I told myself I'd always dreamed, often about those I

was interviewing or researching, and that was what made me the expert writer that I was. It was my great secret, I liked to think. My special power.

I asked Eris a lot of questions, and she was happy to talk. Most of those I met were the same. The fortress was not a secretive place – these were people winning their war, confident in their strength. Many of them didn't know much about the past. Why would they? They had been born long after the horror was over, growing up on a world that was both proud and successful.

I liked them, these people. I had heard tales of the Wolves of Fenris, or the World Eaters, and thought myself lucky that I hadn't ended up chronicling them. These were civilised. They appreciated good food, good wine. They cultivated the arts, and their architecture, as much as I'd seen, was sophisticated.

For all that, just as Widera had warned me, they were conditioned for war, and they didn't hide it. Most of them bore scars. Many more, particularly the oldest survivors, displayed marks of rad-poisoning. That baffled me.

'This world hasn't been purged of all that?' I asked Eris, just before I was due to leave her company.

'No.'

'Secundus neither?'

'Especially Secundus. That one's off limits. They keep it as it was.'

'Why?'

She shrugged. 'You can't make it safe,' she said. 'You can't take it all away.'

By then, I knew more about the way they'd all grown up on the fringes of these desolate semi-deserts, the risks they ran, the needless deaths that piled up. 'But it's pointless – send in a biologis fleet, and they'd scrub out the last of your toxins within a year.'

'And what would that achieve? You would have erased this world and replaced it with one like any other.'

'A sane one.'

'Madness is preferable to erasure.'

I'd laughed, but she'd been entirely serious. I didn't think much of it, back then. I assumed she was exaggerating – these people weren't mad – perhaps to keep me on my toes.

In any case, my doubts were fleeting, because so much else that I saw was so captivating. I saw acolytes to the Auxilia going through their paces in the training yards. I was taken to the construction sites where greater cities were already beginning to rise up from the baking sands. I was shown the artisanal workshops where carapace armour, troop carriers and even lasguns were finished and retooled to Legion specifications. The raw materials were taken from the Mechanicum forges, but the Ninth cared about how such material looked. They filed the insignias off, they imposed better marques and sigils. Vast cadres of artificers seemed to have no other job than to beautify what they were given; it wasn't just the battleships, these people wanted to go to war looking the part. As a lifelong slob myself, I found that in equal parts inexplicable and impressive.

I was getting sick, of course, even then. My lack of proper sleep was becoming endemic, making the daylight hours hard to bear. I'd squint into the heat-shake distance, watching the deep ochre shadows burn off from the hardscrabble plains, and I'd feel nausea start to bite. At times I'd raise my hand up, watching for trembles. They told me the food and drink I enjoyed so much had all been purified, but I wondered how careful they were being.

By the time Widera came to collect me for the short trip down to Baal proper, I was becoming concerned.

'You don't look so good,' she told me, frowning.

'Maybe just void-lurgy,' I suggested, popping a couple more antiemetics.

'Written anything yet?'

I had, actually. In the middle of the frigid nights, in my little cell, scribbling away about what I'd seen and talked about. 'I don't have a title.'

'That always comes last, doesn't it?'

'Not always. I just need the right one.'

We left soon after that. She'd been busy with the schedule the whole time, cultivating her contacts, working on new projects, making sure that her name remained known in all the right places. Whenever we encountered Legion staff, they knew her and clearly respected her. They'd talk about crusade matters. They looked at me as if something scraggy had stumbled in from the desert that needed fumigating.

We were going down to the heart of the system. I had long known I would never be permitted to set foot on the second moon, but the planet itself was almost as tightly cordoned, home to no constructions at all save its famed fortress, the Arx, one of the truly great citadels of the Imperium.

To get there, we took a heavily armed vessel, one crewed exclusively by Legion serfs and bearing the bloody winged icon of the Ninth across its hull. Space Marines accompanied us for the short transit, unspeaking behemoths whose armour softly growled with every threatening movement. I still wasn't used to the aura of fear they created even when merely standing still. These ones were helmed, their fine battleplate gleaming, their longswords and bolters close at hand. I stayed as far away from them as I could, painfully aware that I'd encounter many more once we reached our destination.

Then we were sealed up, boosting clear, tumbling briefly back through the void before the thrusters slammed us into our restraints and the viewports filled with a fresh inferno of re-entry. My one glimpse of the planet below was even bleaker than that I'd had of Primus: absolutely immense tracts of unbroken desert, scab-red, yellow and sienna, the upper atmosphere glimmering with strange lights that were either weather systems I'd never encountered before, or something more malign left over from the bad old days. The emptiness felt enormous, even from so high up – like a canvas scraped clean of detail.

I caught sight of our destination just before the re-entry flames scrubbed it from view. It was a volcano, or two of them perhaps, mingled and sprawling, a giant stepped mass of cracked and darkened rock rising from fractured plains of rust-coloured soil. And yet it couldn't have been a volcano – not a *live* one. Extinct, maybe, or its magma chambers drained and plugged, with only its ossified superstructure remaining to build and remould and raise higher. I squinted, pushing my face up against the armaglass, and saw the construction equipment swarming all over it, earth-moving machines crawling, dust clouds blooming right up against the soaring walls.

'How long have they been building?' I asked.

'More than a hundred years,' said Widera calmly, not bothering to look. 'And they'll be at it for a hundred more.'

I sat back as the turbulence picked up. The descent to the landing stages was grim, made bumpy and jarring by Baal's crushing gravity. I was already wearing the environment suit to help me cope, and had taken yet more pills, but I could feel the drag on my limbs even before we touched down.

When the lander’s doors opened and I stood up again, I staggered under the full impact. I felt like I’d aged a decade just hobbling down the ramp. I remembered what Widera had told me – *he doesn’t respect weakness* – and tried to keep my head up.

Once outside, the next thing to hit me was the heat. I started sweating immediately inside the cocoon of my suit. We had come down near the Arx’s summit, surrounded by beaten earth walls. In the near distance, towers of polished granite rose up into a pale pink sky, shimmering as if underwater. The fortress was far bigger than I’d anticipated from my single look at it on the way down, less a single edifice and more a giant armoured metropolis, carved out of the volcanic rock and encrusted with interlocking circles of parapets, spires and gun towers. We were just inside the lip of the southern wall of the caldera, and running away northwards was the greater concentration of buildings. Slender towers and campaniles jutted clear of close-packed domes and archways, faced with sandstone and granite and polished ceramics though no doubt structurally composed of the Imperium’s finest composite alloys.

Widera was already walking out across the simmering rockcrete, and I limped after her as best I could. The landing site was crowded: Legion serfs and servitors, lexmechanics and Baalite orderlies. Builders were at work even here, fixing aedicules and pediments and entablatures in place and adding lineaments and mosaic decorations over the archways. Bronze cupolas glistened in the sun, shimmering like rose gold under lumens.

Widera took me into the fortress interior, where the oppressive heat gave way to a rock-carved coolness. We hurried down inclined corridors, feeling like we were worming our way gradually into the caldera’s old heart. The sounds of building echoed after us, but soon we were in more finished areas, ones with smooth-paved floors and richly decorated ceilings. True members of the Legion, the Astartes warriors, crunched their way past us. Most went unhelmed, and I saw again that strangely uniform cut of their features. I also saw the great variety of adornments on their armour – the gold-traced runes, sigils, devices and insignias. Every inch of the incarnadine plate was scrawled over with decoration, always finely etched, always intricate, sometimes bafflingly so. I was beginning, thanks to my belated research and Eris’ patient explanations, to decipher some of the signs. Company designations, honour markings, narrative descriptions of previous campaigns. I recognised certain battle references, and noted the

proliferation of similar icons: chalices, stylised faces, drops of blood. Some of those warriors were of the First Sphere of the Legion, like Bel Sepatus, the ones the primarch kept close to him in positions of honour and special responsibility.

So he was close, now. He was somewhere nearby in this warren of terracotta and frescoes. I thought I might have been able to detect his presence, somehow, like a heat source or close weather front, but all I felt was grav-lethargy. I wanted to stop for a moment, catch my breath and take another pill, but Widera kept on striding. Everyone was striding. They were here for a short time only, a brief stopover before they hared off again into their natural element. I wondered what they made of the place they had built. Did they venerate it, as the intensive decoration implied? Or was it merely an impediment for them, a place they only lingered in when they had to, before the chance came to head back into the stars to war?

Eventually we reached a high archway barred by a pair of polished cedar doors. Incense burned in censers on either side of them, and the keystone was crowned with a serene golden mask surrounded by laurels. Two Blood Angels stood guard, both in the livery of the Ikisat, the Sanguinary Guard. Their armour was highly polished gold, even more dazzling than the crimson worn by the rest of the Legion. It was almost too much, that. It was like they were drunk on their own splendour, and that intoxication, given my light-headedness, was beginning to get to me.

Widera shot me a severe glance. ‘Hold it together,’ she muttered. ‘I brought you here, so don’t show me up.’

That was considerate of her. I did my very best.

But then the doors opened.

What am I going to say, now, after so much has happened, about that moment? Can I even remember it accurately? I doubt it. Sometimes I think I was only seeing what I was meant to see. Other times, I wonder whether it even happened at all.

But of course it did. I’m getting melodramatic. Most parts are a blur, but some are vivid enough. I remember how my movements were heavy, like wading through water. I remember the buzzing sound in my ears. Rad-poisoning, Widera told me later. She wanted me to think that, though. It suited all of them for that to be true. Or maybe I was just exhausted, by natural weakness tested too much by the sudden lurch into the heart of our galactic war.

I should start from the beginning. The basics. The room itself – very large, very long, an audience chamber with a high gothic-arched roof. The walls were of veined stone, the alcoves full of marble statues, all martial poses and lithe, heroic stances. Floating lumen-clusters, jewelled and gilded, drifted silently overhead. The smell of incense was steady, as was the hubbub of voices. Hundreds must have been assembled across a chequerboard floor, but it was a shadowy space, buried deep within the Arx's core, so who knows exactly how many hung around us. These were scholars and loremasters, tech-priests and strategos, ambassadors and assorted Imperial power brokers. Hololiths spiralled in the gloom, just as they had around Bel Sepatus, all of them illuminating different quadrants of the fleet volume above us. A majority were Astartes, most of them company captains or more senior ranks, bedecked in formal cloaked armour. They stood in clusters, discussing trajectories and velocities and arguing over specifics. The tone was respectful but intense – decisions made now would determine the success of operations taking place months later and halfway across the crusade's expanse.

A throne stood at the far end of the chamber. It was empty. Its legitimate occupier stood at the bottom of the steps leading up to it, conferring with a small group of aides. Perhaps he only ascended to the lofty position in times of festival or crisis, ready to issue dire proclamations to the assembled faithful in the manner of an ancient monarch. Or maybe he never used it. I suspect the latter, because everything I know of his character indicates that he hated formality and nursed endless doubts over his own right to rule. And that's part of his legend, isn't it? One who only reluctantly assumed the trappings of a king, preferring instead the fellowship of his warriors.

The odd thing, of course, is that such statements of humility only made him *more* intimidating. He was *there*, right in front of me. We were walking into his presence, pushing our way steadily past the groups of officials and commanders. At any moment he might swivel that serene head, angle that piercing gaze at me, and we would be on the same level, in the same room, somehow expected to converse with one another.

I will try not to lapse into cliche with my initial observations. Of course he was beautiful. Of course he was splendid. He appeared almost as a source of illumination himself, something that glowed with a halo of burning gold while everything else glistened in soft reflected focus. His face was lean, but not overly so. His ceremonial plate was as fine as all the

rest of the armour-pieces in that hall. Maybe Widera's injunctions had done their work, but I didn't find the wings as distracting as I'd feared. They should have been the only thing I could look at, but in that place, at that time, they merely seemed a natural component of the finery of the entire scene, just another fragment of his genius for the arresting image. They didn't seem wrong. 'Mutation' certainly wasn't the right word for them. 'Embellishment', maybe?

By then, I was barely conscious of my own movements. I was being propelled, almost automatically, towards him. As Widera and I neared, he finally turned to look at me. I met his gaze, and for a split second it felt as if some vast power had locked on to me, ready to scrutinise me for any and all secrets I possessed, and I would confess everything, right away, no objections, because what would be the point of holding out against something so immense and invincible?

'Ah,' said Sanguinius, as I was finally pushed into his orbit. 'Our new remembrancer. How was your journey, Ser Kautenya?'

His voice was just as you'd expect it: soft, controlled. The accent was Baalite, like Eris', but with the underlying rhythms that I'd encountered in the endangered speakers of Terran vernacular. He had an open expression, and stood with the same kind of unconscious poise that I'd observed before in the very best dancers. Warriors, too.

'It was fine, thank you, my lord,' I said, bowing.

'I read your book,' he said.

I was immediately seized with the mix of joy and horror that I always felt when people told me that. I shouldn't have been surprised, though – Widera had recommended me, but the decision to take me on would have been his. Remembrancers were, for all that we tended to forget it, influential people. We represented the crusade to the wider Imperium. We glorified it, explained it, and – very occasionally – criticised it. It mattered to many of the Legion fleets, the more civilised ones at least, how they were represented.

'Did you like it?' I asked.

'It confirmed Judita's recommendation,' he said, nodding at Widera. 'You have a gift for the pen-picture. Though I can see how it got you in trouble.' He shot a brief glance at one of the Space Marines at his side, one wearing golden armour. 'We are at war, are we not, Azkaellon? Truth can

be a casualty, as they say. Plain-speaking, even more so. Tell me, did you expect the controversy? Did you revel in it?'

I'd been asked that question many times, and I tended to give different answers, because I really couldn't remember. On this occasion, though, it seemed sensible to be as candid as I could.

'I took it seriously,' I said. 'The ideal. Truthfulness. I thought that justified what we're doing.'

'War can be brutal.'

'So it can. But there are laws to govern it, otherwise we're no better than the xenos we fight.'

'So you set yourself up to judge those who did the work, eh? Ever been a soldier?'

'If judges were required to be of the same professions as their accused, our courts would stand empty.'

Sanguinius laughed. 'Though it might seem presumptuous to compile a history of the crusade and call it *False Dawn*. Unless you really know what you're talking about.'

'Everything I included was researched. I have evidence for it all.'

'But that didn't count for much, did it, when the censors came for you.'

'They weren't the problem, to be fair,' I said ruefully. 'The public were worse.'

'They believe in what we're doing.'

'Because all they read is what the Army gives them.'

I couldn't believe what I was doing. Just moments ago I could scarcely remember my own name. Now I was trading arguments with him.

I knew he wasn't being entirely serious. I knew he was testing me, seeing if I could stand up to some gentle pushback. All the same, I'd always been this way about that book. I still thought it was right. I still thought someone needed to say what others were merely whispering to themselves – that the things the Night Lords had done were abominable. That the Wolves of Fenris were basically ungovernable. That the World Eaters were plain out of control, and plenty of Auxilia were just as bad: careless with civilian lives, careless with their own. It hadn't been hard to gather up such stories. Plenty of credible accounts never even made it into the final draft for want of room; I could have easily written many sequels, had my reputation not taken such a dive immediately after publication.

I could feel the hostility around me just then. Most of those listening in on the conversation were Space Marines, the pinnacle of the Imperium's war machine. They had faced threats beyond imagination, died in droves, all for the survival of our species in a galaxy bursting at the seams with enemies who wished only to devour us, and here was I, sweaty, overweight, ludicrous, digging up every piece of dirt on them I could find.

They thought of me, no doubt, just as I had been widely portrayed. A hack. A careless man, uncaring of their sacrifice. A ghoul.

'You didn't write about us,' Sanguinius said.

'Nothing personal. I could never substantiate anything. Not from before–'

'I came. And since then, our reputation has been unblemished.' He smiled again. 'We have archives on the *Red Tear*. They're open to you. You will see that our past has been difficult, just as it has been for many others.' He folded his arms, and the lamplight caught on the gold chasing of his gauntlets. 'But look around you too. Look at this place, before we leave it. See what has been built. See what can arise from the mistakes of the past.'

'I have done. It's impressive.'

'And now things are having to change again. We come here fresh from Nikaea – you know that? You'll have seen the proclamations surrounding the Edict. You will understand what it means for us. We will obey it, despite the harm it does to us. Why? Because otherwise we'd be no better than the xenos we fight.'

My turn to smile then.

'And I might choose to say, now, that I wish you to reflect all this in what you write,' Sanguinius said. 'I might choose to ask you to tell the Imperium how much this single judgement will add to the tally of our slain, even as we faithfully enact my father's every order. But I won't. Write what you wish. Make the picture faithful. You will have no censors among our number, because what we do here is for eternity.' He looked out across those standing nearby, all of whom were listening. 'A new age, one that shall outlast any other in splendour. And even then, even when we achieve that goal, there will be failure and backsliding, because we are human, and that is our condition. So then we will need accounts such as yours, to warn us of the dangers of complacency. Record truly, and without fear. Otherwise, there is very little point in you being here.'

From any other mouth I'd have been on the lookout for insincerity then, for the subtext that was warning me to keep my dirty fingers out of too many secret vaults. I couldn't detect any. I was a cynical soul, that I knew, but I believed he meant all of it.

'Judita spoke highly of you,' Sanguinius went on. 'I admire her judgement, so that secured your place here. But I also admire your writing. Do not let me down, and certainly not through cowardice.'

I felt that he knew me already – my vices, my weaknesses, even the things I might decide to do in the future. That was impossible, of course, but as that classically perfect visage moved, as his intense eyes slid from one adoring face to another, I could almost see the figure before me as existing out of time, free of the ravages that affected the rest of us, a piece of eternity given mortal form and able to peer across the tumbled skein of history in both directions.

'I'll try not to, lord,' I said, weakly.

The conversation moved on after that. Sanguinius spoke to Widera about her recent commissions. And then there were discussions of the post-Nikaea settlement, and how it would affect the coming deployment. Most issues had already been decided during the time of counsels on Baal – the Librarians would continue to fight, but would no longer utilise their unique gifts. Azkaellon, whom I later found out was the commander of the Sanguinary Guard itself, had apparently been in support of that move. Details still needed to be ironed out, hence the earnest debates taking place around us. In due course the primarch would rule on them all, though for the time being he let various points of view find their expression.

I listened to it all as best I could, not understanding much of what I heard. It was hard not to simply gaze at Sanguinius as they prattled, to bathe in the light of his extreme and severe beauty.

As things were coming to a close, Widera leaned closer, placing her hand on my elbow. 'So what do you think?' she murmured, out of earshot of the others. 'What you expected?'

It wasn't. Not really. I would need time to process it all; at some stage I would have to become more critical, more analytical, do my job.

But not yet. For now, I was – there is no other word for it – in awe.

'I have my title,' I told her, noticing how the pearl-white feathers of his wings glinted as the pinions moved, and already thinking how I might describe them. '*The Great Angel*.'

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FIVE

Then I hit the dirt hard. So hard that it knocked the breath out of me, and I nearly blacked out. I tried to get up, to gulp in some air, and only succeeded in slurping a layer of oily mud up against my rebreather intake.

I jerked my head up, panicking, and slapped the ooze from my mask before hauling in deep, panting breaths. I crawled up the sopping crater slope, feeling my knees and boots suck and pop in the grime. Overhead, starbursts of weapons fire went off – vivid and blinding – then the deafening crack that made the puddles slap and foam.

It was night. Or they had made it night, with the slam-curtain of artillery that had churned the landscape into a seamless fog of thrown-up ash and dirt. The entire atmosphere had been uprooted, spontaneously condensing as if in floods of angry tears, converting the previously solid ground into a quagmire that boiled and seethed.

I wanted to scream out, to shout my throat hoarse, but I couldn't see anything, didn't know where I was meant to be. The Rhino transport I had been riding in was twenty metres back now, its rear end embedded in the muck, its front end tilted upward like a toppled sarsen, all surrounded with snarls of ink-black smoke that coiled from its punctured underbelly. I could just about smell the stink of charred flesh over the noxious mix of engine oils and munition chems. A few scraps of Legion uniform fabric fluttered in

the heated air. The remains of my driver and her crew. Was I the only one? The only one to scramble out before the fuel tank went? Was that possible? The least fit and the least well trained of them all?

They'd tried to keep it going, that was their mistake. I'd bolted for the exit after the first big explosion, but they'd tried to salvage the situation, probably because I was with them. So I had their deaths on my conscience now – four Legion serfs, some of the finest baseline warriors in the entire Imperium, all because I wanted to see for myself *what it was like at the front.*

You damned idiot.

I coughed up something hot and wet, staggered to the rim of the crater, shuffling on my knees by the end as the acidic rain lashed at me. My bulky armoured gauntlets sunk into the sodden gravel, my helm-display was stuttering. I scrabbled around for the laspistol at my belt, pulled it out, checked the charge. I blinked hard, coughed up more phlegm, reached the summit, *focused.*

Either my vision was shaky or the entire planet was – the scene before me wobbled as if someone had balanced it on a faulty gyro. A bleak plain stretched off towards a dark horizon, lit up only by mortar blasts and las-beams. Smoke plumes billowed from previous impacts, thick with promethium. The landscape ahead was scored from the mud-spattered charge of more than three hundred armoured transports. I knew all the names: Rhino, Land Raider, Spartan, Arquitor. They churned through the semi-liquid ground in formation, throwing up sprays like furrowed earth from a ploughshare. The thunderheads overhead disgorged sheets of rain, splashing and fizzing in the bouncing lumen-beams.

I crawled forward, worming my way through the ice-cold mud. Even then, even when I was terrified out of my mind, I was taking it all in. This is why I'd come. This is what I'd felt it important to see.

'A compliance,' Bel Sepatus had told me, a week ago now.

'Standard stuff, then,' I'd said, affecting any kind of knowledge.

'Stay clear when we make our landing.'

'But I'll need to see it.'

It had been difficult making the case. I'd had to work at it, using Widera, persevering. Eventually I got the clearance for close observation, just before the orders were given and the Blood Angels had got to work.

I regretted it now. Bel Sepatus was a sour and arrogant soul, but he hadn’t been wrong.

The noise was off the scale, even filtered by my armour’s systems. The whirling lights were blinding, the earth movements were bone-breaking. The protection suit they’d given me was cumbersome and heavy, slipping out of kilter around my body as I tried to make it work. I could just about make out the infantry formations marching in support of all that mobile armour, hundreds of armoured warriors powering through the knee-deep mud. I could hear the thunder of gunships swooping so low they vaporised the puddles under their thrusters, hovering over the lead vehicles to unload their missiles then boosting onwards before they were targeted. The Auxilia were spread out on either flank, kilometres distant but visible by the smog banks they created – thousands of vehicles and tens of thousands of soldiers advancing under coronas of blistering ranged fire.

Overwhelming. Astonishing. All perfectly coordinated, rolling onwards in a single colossal wave of destruction. I could just about make out the target: a line of high sloped walls stacked up against the northern horizon, wreathed in fire and smoke and bracketed with endless trails of projectiles. Half of the battlements seemed to have been breached, slumped into landslips of rubble, and beyond the perimeter was an angry crimson glow that flickered and throbbed.

Something exploded a few metres away from me – a stray mortar, maybe – and the impact sent me flying back down the slope I’d just lurched up. I slipped and slithered, feeling my boots stick in the slurry. The more I struggled, the more the soup of earth and rubble dragged me down to the crater’s watery heart, and for a terrible moment I thought I’d get pulled under.

Then I heard more roaring, thundering now from every direction, and I crawled desperately away from the sound. I caught the metallic whiff of something familiar – the superheated pistons of power armour – before feeling the iron clasp of a gauntlet at my back. I was yanked upward, gagging as my helm’s tubing tightened around my neck, before being hoisted under an arm and propelled rapidly back up the slope. My limbs banged loosely against moving ceramite panels, my head swung around. I saw two banks of lumens, very bright, and the gaping maw of an open vehicle crew bay. My ears were ringing, my vision was bloodshot.

The Space Marine who'd grabbed me leapt up into the air, landing on the ramp and grabbing a chain-length to pull himself in. At the same moment, the transport lurched up into the sky, swivelling on a downblast that made the mud and debris below erupt.

I was dumped onto the floor, and had to scrabble for some restraints to stop me slamming around the interior like a thrown doll. The crew bay contained four other occupants, all of them Blood Angels. The one who had hauled me to safety was growling orders to the flight crew, while the others seemed almost oblivious to my presence. I tried to clamp down on my shivering, to snap the restraint-clips into place. The roar of the gunship's engines was incredible – we were travelling very fast already and appeared to be accelerating.

The warrior who had scooped me up turned to face me. I saw condensation glistening on his vox-grille, the dull glow burning out from his helm lenses, the mottled heat scars and drying mud webs on his beautiful battleplate. His crimson helm had been engraved with tiny silver trace patterns, and his huge shoulder guards bore the image of an eye within a stylised flame motif.

First Sphere. Though I didn't recognise all the livery.

'You are to be kept alive,' the Space Marine told me. I couldn't tell what he thought of that.

'My thanks,' I said, feeling both ridiculous and guilty. Diverting Space Marines from their duties was not undertaken lightly. 'Back to the fleet?'

He shook his head. 'We are needed ahead. Remain in place, do not move.'

I felt a fresh chill suddenly pass through me. I could tell, more or less, which way we were heading. 'The front,' I murmured.

'You sought to witness our way of war,' he said flatly, reaching for the hilt of his sword. 'Now you will do so.'

The world was called Ylech. I had to ask how to spell it before we left Baal – the pronunciation, at least to me, was hard to pin down. It was a world long populated by humans, a settlement that stretched back as far as any records went. Perhaps it had been colonised in the very first phase of our galactic expansion, or maybe in the centuries of confusion afterwards. Like other places that had survived the upheaval of Old Night, it had become proud. It had weathered the storm, endured when so many other places had gone under. They had industrial power still, a functioning

government, armies, even a fleet of void-going ships. And now the Imperium had come for them, and they hadn't wanted any part of it. Why would they? They'd already been through the worst of the strife – at least as far as they could see – and they had no reason to cede control to a new power, no matter how flashy the armour or powerful the ships.

So it was that Sanguinius had come. The primarch's presence had been, in the initial phase, more about the application of diplomacy than force. Earlier embassies sent out by the IX Legion had failed to achieve much resolution, and it was hoped that the Angel's charisma might be enough to achieve a breakthrough. That was the way it often went. Those of us who'd followed the crusade tended to focus on the battles, but very often worlds were brought into the fold without shots being fired. Everyone preferred it that way – it saved ammunition for the real enemies. I don't know how many incorporation treaties were concluded peacefully. Most of them, maybe? Certainly enough that when things went wrong and the blades were unsheathed, it was seen as something of a failure.

I was present at a few of the initial meetings as an observer. Some gatherings took place on the *Red Tear*, others on warships of the Ylechim fleet. They were strange ships, those – all dark surfaces and tomb-like innards. The air they breathed was thicker than I liked, and tasted faintly bitter, like over-steeped tea. Our counterparts themselves were fairly standard in appearance – skin towards the darker end of the spectrum due to a powerful sun, height and weight just under the average. They had slightly-too-round eyes, I thought, which made them look more timid than they were. As if to compensate, their battle armour was flamboyant and ridged, with high slit-visored helms and studded breastplates. Everything seemed to have been fashioned from dark bronze and iron, a stolid visual language which must have been adopted during their long and lonely fights for survival. They were a dour breed, suspicious and tight-lipped, and never seemed to make a decision without referring it to their labyrinthine series of committees. It might have been a laborious culture, but it was also advanced – analysis by the strategos had unearthed extensive arsenals of regular weaponry, alongside rad- and chem-based devices whose full capabilities remained largely unknown.

I was also present at several of the consultations held privately by the Legion. Sanguinius always presided over those together with the senior commanders of his assembled forces. His reluctance to commit to battle

was striking. He thought it a waste of resources, and believed the Ylechim could be brought around through negotiation. As the prospects of this outcome diminished over a period of weeks, he ordered the full might of the Legion fleet to be drawn up into attack positions, taking care to make the advance both steady and ostentatious. Though the language of the discussions remained courteous, the intent was clear.

At one of the final private gatherings before we became committed to action, I thought he looked morose. We were seated around a long table in one of the *Tear*'s council chambers. Azkaellon argued that no more could be settled through negotiation. He was supported by the famed First Captain, Raldoron, who had been active at Nikaea alongside his primarch and now appeared eager to make up for lost time. I was very impressed with him – where Azkaellon was imperious and rigid, Raldoron appeared almost… human. I didn't doubt that both were absolutely terrifying when unleashed, but they spoke calmly and gave every appearance of being as polished and civilised as the best of Terra's regular ambassadors.

'I do not believe that they negotiate in good faith any longer,' said Azkaellon flatly. 'All that remains is delay, during which they are arming.'

Raldoron nodded. 'We have shown our hand to them. They know more of us than they did when the first contacts were made, and still they hold back. Nothing persuades me they intend a peaceful resolution to this now.'

Sanguinius sat back in his throne, his expression pensive. 'We have already demonstrated what we can do,' he said. 'This is stubbornness. Still, I am not ready to give up just yet. Fleet master, how stands the void preparation?'

'Deployment complete,' replied Fleet Master Astian, another good-natured member of the Legion, from my limited experience. 'We may strike at your command. Orbital supremacy will be achieved within three days.'

Azkaellon shook his elegant head. 'Three days.' He looked up at his primarch. 'They have the same tactical data. Why persist in this?'

'Because they believe something will be found, from somewhere,' said the primarch. 'A slice of luck, or maybe deliverance. They hope. They *hope*. We have not driven that out of them yet.'

Raldoron chuckled darkly. 'We could have done,' he said. 'Imagine it – if the Nostramans had been charged with this.'

Astian laughed. 'Or the Eaters of Worlds.'

‘Enough.’ Sanguinius sighed, placed his hands together under his chin. He closed his eyes, and for a moment I thought he’d drifted away from us entirely. ‘I still feel their doubt,’ he said. ‘I sense the division between them – those who wish to capitulate now, those who wish to maintain their independence. Any action we take to press our case will tip the balance towards those who believe they can win a war against us, and I wish to conclude this, if I can, without bloodshed.’

Azkaellon looked sceptical.

‘And who knows?’ asked Sanguinius, opening his eyes again. ‘It is their home world. Their final redoubt. They may be stronger here than we imagine.’

‘I have three attack scenarios prepared for you, lord,’ said Raldoron. ‘Should we wish to preserve the majority of the industrial base, we could opt to–’

‘No, that is not how this will go,’ said Sanguinius bleakly. ‘The pattern is clear. First, we indulge them. We present the truth of their situation fairly and without deception. They are given time. They are given all assistance. More than many of my brothers would countenance, at any rate.’ Then his gaze darkened – I couldn’t meet it. ‘But if the moment comes, should they persist beyond endurance, then my judgement is this. Annihilation. Not one of their cities shall remain, not one of their warriors shall be left alive. The world shall be scoured clean, ready to be remade in the image of Unity. It is their choice, one we shall present to them openly. Once made, it cannot be taken back.’

I remember how shocked I was to hear that. The words were delivered in a tone of chilling finality. I don’t think he enjoyed the prospect of such destruction. I certainly don’t think he was boasting. That was just the way it was – folly punished with vengeance. He sounded regretful, as if he wished there were some other way, but there wasn’t, and it was his job to ensure that standards didn’t slip.

For a moment or two I even wondered if he were joking, or perhaps exaggerating. I looked up at Raldoron, half expecting him to laugh, and then go on to present his variant strategies.

No laugh came. All those assembled merely nodded in recognition that a familiar point in the proceedings had been reached.

‘How long do they have?’ asked Azkaellon.

‘One further session, on their flagship,’ said Sanguinius. ‘I will deliver the ultimatum.’

It was almost casual, the death sentence for a world announced.

‘Everything at all, or nothing at all,’ I said out loud. I hadn’t meant to. All eyes turned to me, and I found myself wishing I could slither under the table and disappear.

‘Quite right, remembrancer,’ said Sanguinius, finally cracking something like a smile, though it wasn’t remotely humorous. ‘I think you are finally beginning to understand us.’

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SIX

We then entered a period of limbo, a last gasp before the hammer fell. I remember wishing fervently that the Ylechim would see sense. I'd already witnessed enough of the Legion's assembled power to guess that going up against the Blood Angels would be folly, and the primarch's demeanour in the final council had made me dread a full demonstration.

In the meantime, though, I had my work to do. I was required to observe, to record, to gain a full picture of the Legion as they prepared for a war I hoped they wouldn't fight. I spoke to dozens of menials from a range of ranks. They were hard-working, capable, somewhat reserved, occasionally contemptuous of me and my task. Their loyalty to their Astartes masters was absolute – I never heard so much as a whisper against the Space Marines. I put that down to their heritage on Baal: although not all of them were Baalites, the culture and traditions of that world had survived implantation into the Legion. They had a virtually religious attitude to the warriors they armoured, fed and kept supplied. It was a source of pride, I imagined, that a marginal, sickly race had thrown off its disadvantages and become a player in the great galactic endeavours. Their lives on those ships were hard, with severe penalties for any failure to perform, but I heard no complaints. It was a hard galaxy, they often said, and only the strong deserved to survive within it.

As the chrono clicked down towards Sanguinius' ultimatum, I attempted to make contact with the true fighting strength of the Legion, the Astartes themselves. My first attempts were rebuffed – none of them wished to have anything to do with me. They were all busy, heavily involved in their pre-combat training rituals and preparations. Bel Sepatus, one of those inducted into the primarch's own honour guard, did not respond to my attempts to make contact, despite what he'd instructed me to do on Baal Primus.

I could have left it at that, but I didn't. I pushed, I cajoled, I burrowed away at any faint expression of helpfulness until it became easier to give in than keep resisting. A deckmaster responsible for one of hundreds of training levels finally relented, spoke to one of his masters, who spoke to one of hers, and I found some doors finally opening.

So it was that I met Aelion. He was a standard Space Marine, by the rank designation, although in reality there was no such thing as 'standard' with these fighters. He was a Terran, which in those days was becoming rarer – the late stages of the crusade had seen the Legion steadily increase its recruits from Baal. He was a member of the ninth tactical squad of the Seventh Company, one of the many detachments which had been housed within the *Red Tear*'s cavernous innards. He was finishing a training session when I found him, down in one of the deep pits below the enginarium. It took me a long time to find it, and by the time I arrived I was sweating and out of breath.

I only witnessed the final few minutes of his regimen, and that was enough to knock the remaining spirit out of me. He wasn't fighting one of his own kind, but a combat servitor. The thing was monstrous – I even wondered if its original body might have been an abhuman's – and covered in thick armour plating. It must have stood nearly three metres tall, about two across, with an entirely enclosed helm and weapon-arms terminated with multiple powered blades. The few patches of exposed muscle were a purple-crimson, indicating that its bloodstream had been flooded with stimms, and its elaborate armour was covered in bundles of power units and drive cores. Far less refined than power armour, but I doubted it was much less powerful in brute terms – to all intents and purposes, this was a Space Marine mock-up, drilled for a single aspect of combat: expendable, testing within the narrow parameters of its design.

Aelion was unarmoured. He paced around the circular pit in a fabric tunic offering no protection at all against those jutting blades. He carried only a

gladius with the energy field killed. His skin was a pale grey, and I could see the ridges of input jacks stacked across his back. The two combatants sparred and lunged, the servitor enormous and clanking, the Astartes fluid and elusive. Both of them were able to move viciously quickly when they wished to strike, and at first sight the contest looked somewhat chaotic – a flurry of wild movements that seemed random. It didn't help that the combat-servitor gave off huge plumes of steam and smoke as its mechanics struggled to keep up with the Space Marine, surrounding them both in a fog of dust and kicked-out straw-flecks.

The more I watched, though, the more I saw a pattern. Aelion wasn't trying to disable the machine – he was aiming for strikes at specified places on the servitor's armour. These were the thickest chunks of armour, corresponding to weaker points on real power armour, and they were already pitted and dented from multiple hits. The machine's two main functions seemed to be to protect those points while attempting to disable its enemy, and it did so aggressively, clunking and thrusting right at its flesh-and-blood opponent with a surprising degree of speed and skill. Aelion ducked and darted around the scything blades, parrying the worst of the strikes before lunging in close to attempt a hit.

Once I'd worked out the shape of the contest, I found it mesmerising. The encounter had an almost balletic feel, a flickering series of intertwined limbs, metal and flesh, the sharp edges missing one another by millimetres. How long had they been at this? Hours, for all I knew. The servitor, I guessed, wouldn't tire at all – the test was for the human component.

It ended, as it had to, with a surgical strike against the servitor's throat – the gladius spat out, weaving a path through the gyrating weapon-limbs, hitting the designated target with a dull clang.

The machine immediately shut down, its blades hanging mid-air, the lights across its armour flickering out. Aelion drew back, panting hard, and the clouds of smoke slowly dissipated around him. Floor-level lumens glowed into life across the pit's perimeter and a series of heavy doors slid open on the far wall. Half a dozen tech-priests shuffled out of the shadows and began to inspect the damage to their creature.

Only then did Aelion notice me. He walked over, blade still in hand. His tunic was thick with sweat. He had a close-shorn crop of blond hair and pale brown eyes. Though his physique was formidable, it was not pleasant to look at. Every surface was pitted and marred with control nodes for his

armour, or old scars, or the tracery of secondary augmetics. His muscle-bulk bordered on the absurd rather than the magnificent, though clearly it was effective.

‘You’re the remembrancer,’ he said, reaching for a rag to wipe sweat from his brow.

I looked up at him. His aroma was somewhat overpowering – a pungent chemical mix that reminded me of an overheated machine more than a mortal body. ‘I am. That was impressive.’

Aelion snorted. ‘Impressive is taking on a living thing.’ Then he grinned. ‘Fancy your chances?’

I laughed out loud.

He sheathed his blade, took up a robe and wrapped it around those ludicrously enlarged shoulders. ‘So what do you want?’ he asked, as the main door to the training pit cranked open.

‘To discover. To learn.’

He pushed on into the corridor beyond, and I followed him. We were soon walking through the dimly lit, oily underworld of the ship’s less illustrious districts. Menials bustled around us, their faces hidden under cowls, bowing deeply to Aelion as he passed them.

‘You would do better to witness a true battle,’ Aelion said. ‘This is just to keep my eye in.’

‘It looked serious enough to me. It might have wounded you.’

He turned to look down at me, the twitch of a smile on his callused lips. ‘You think it even touched me?’

‘I don’t know. Did it?’

‘If it had, I’d have reported myself to my sergeant for penance.’

I could imagine Bel Sepatus saying the same thing, but I couldn’t imagine him saying it in the same way. Aelion seemed lighter of heart, more energetic, more charismatic. No doubt he had fewer weighty matters of long-term strategic concern on his mind, and no burden of command, but the contrast was still clear. I liked him. I liked that this demeanour was also part of the Legion, and that they were not all angst-ridden, tight-lipped souls.

He took me to his cell, located several decks higher up. I recognised that this must be an honour, so did my best to be respectful. We spoke throughout while he – quite unabashedly – disrobed and pulse-showered, afterwards donning a shift that hid most of the heavy ironwork over his

torso and shoulders. He was happy to explain the core assumptions and structures that he operated under. He gave me an insight into the nature of squad actions, of the Legion's preferences and doctrines. He talked about the older history, though plenty of that was before his time. He expounded his views on the crusade with candour.

'The great march forward,' he said, fervently. 'The expression of our species' genius. We are only its instruments, of course, though it gives me joy to be involved.'

'It must be hard, too,' I said. 'To lose colleagues. To be forever at war.'

Aelion shrugged. 'For you, maybe. For me – no. What else is there? I barely remember what it was like before I became what I am.' He grinned again; he did that a lot. 'And what I am is… glorious.'

That was boastful, and he knew it. Hard to disagree, all the same.

'I don't relish the deaths of my brothers,' he went on. 'But I do not mourn them either. We are made to do this, and the only shame is to die without prestige.'

'Or honour.'

'Prestige. I want my name *remembered*. I want people to think that I died well, and that I took a thousand enemies of the Emperor with me when I went.'

'How close are you to that tally?'

'Getting there.'

I looked around the cell. It was as finely decorated as all Blood Angels chambers were. Tapestries hung from the walls, each one a record of a famous engagement. Candles burned softly in their alcoves, making the light warm and wavering. On a pillar in the corner was a dark bronze sculpture – a head, one that I recognised as Aelion's own.

'Did you create this?' I asked, getting up and going over to it.

'I did. You like it?'

I did, very much. Like everything these people did, it was painstaking. The expression on the bronze face was serene, confident, like an ancient god's, gazing coolly out over a field of conquest. It was idealised, I saw – the augmetics were removed, the proportions more classical, but it was unmistakably him.

'Who teaches you all this?' I wondered aloud. 'How come you can all do it so well?'

‘It takes time to learn. It doesn’t come easily. But we have the blood of the primarch within us, and so we have a share of his genius.’

It wasn’t the first time I’d heard this kind of formulation. Sometimes it felt like the Legion was simply a giant gestalt entity, a hundreds-of-thousands-strong extension of a single individual. How far was that the fabled gene-seed doing its work, and how far was it something else? Mass psychology, perhaps?

Next to the bronze head was a closed door, leading to what I guessed was a further chamber.

‘More in there?’ I asked, lightly, reaching for the release.

Aelion’s movement was so fast, so instant, that I didn’t see it take place at all. One moment, my hand was reaching out for the door jamb, the next he was beside me, his fist closed over mine.

‘Private,’ he said, firmly. ‘And I think we’ve talked enough now.’

I stared up into his brown eyes. He wasn’t angry, I didn’t think – just insistent.

‘Fine,’ I said, pulling my hand back, laughing it off.

I’d offended him. Or maybe just transgressed against hospitality. Either way, he wasn’t moving.

I backed away. ‘I’ve taken up your time.’

He wasn’t smiling now. I could tell he wanted me gone. And that made me want to stay. Throne, why was I like this?

‘I have things I need to do now,’ Aelion said.

I wanted so much to push this, to see what he was ashamed of in that chamber. Impossible, of course. I’d already chanced my arm, had more time with him than I’d expected, and it wasn’t as if I could intimidate him into doing anything he didn’t want to.

‘I’d like to talk again sometime,’ I said. ‘If you can spare the time, that is.’

Aelion didn’t move a muscle. ‘Leave a request with the deck-master.’

I knew just what would happen to that.

‘Maybe I’ll come and find you again,’ I said. ‘When things calm down. Or the compliance is over.’

Aelion activated the outer door release, and the panel slid open.

‘You will not be waiting long for that,’ he said.

He was right – we weren’t waiting long. When the moment came, and the chance arose to see the consequences of a world’s defiance, it was Aelion’s

own words that made me do it.

You would do better to witness a true battle.

Sanguinius hadn't wanted to fight. The reluctance hadn't been feigned. And yet, once the matter was forced, the violence unleashed was beyond imagination. I hadn't been prepared for the full scale of it, even after many warnings. Neither had the Ylechim. During the first few days of the titanic void clashes, when the massed battleships were lighting the void up with fire and fury, a delegation from the beleaguered world had tried to make contact to reverse their previous intransigence and sue for peace. They would cooperate now, they said – no need for this scale of destruction.

Too late. Just as the primarch had said, the chance had been fairly offered, and now it had gone. Orbital supremacy took only two days. Then the landings followed, spread out across all population centres. Blood Angels strike-units took out the key defences, while wave upon wave of well-supported Auxilia overran the cities. The planning had been immaculate. I saw for myself how carefully the battlefronts overlapped and supported one another. They had done this many times, and knew exactly where to strike. It was fast, it was brutal, it was numbing.

Now we were already into the final days, the denouement of a world's execution. Their final remaining capital city stood before us, a huge walled urban complex towering over what had once been fertile plains. The outworks were in flames on all sides, struck by multiple simultaneous assaults. The atmosphere had been turned into sheets of igniting promethium vapour, the fields churned up into a poisoned, boiling quagmire. Defensive bastions that had withstood every insurrection and xenos incursion during the dark days of Old Night were now piles of smouldering rubble.

After my Rhino had been destroyed and my rescuers had come for me by air, I actually had a better chance to witness events at an even closer range. I managed to twist my head around to get a blurred view out of the gunship's narrow slit-windows. Amid all the flying ash and muck, I saw high ramparts with immense gouges carved into them. The terrain below was thick with armoured vehicles blasting their way through the breaches, supported by armoured warriors racing to overwhelm any isolated pocket of resistance.

I could barely make out any defenders in the fire-blown gloom. They were being routed now, knocked back and buried alive as their citadels fell

apart around them. I did spy some resistance holding out between the enormous shells of two bombed-black cylindrical towers – a knot of fighters in heavy armour-suits attempting to maintain a defensive position with support from some kind of multi-legged mechanised walkers. The volume of fire they laid down looked impressive: energy beams that briefly flared neon blue, backed up by projectiles hurled from the open barrels of static launchers.

It didn't last. Just before the gunship's barrelling flight carried them out of view, I saw Legion heavy weapons erupt right back at them, zeroed down on the enemy lines with exceptional precision. I'm no expert on munitions. Were those volkite beams in that hurricane? Las-bursts, bolstered with bolt-rounds and explosive charges? Maybe all of those things. The important thing was the targeting, which was perfect. The fusillade destroyed the position, blasting apart the walls on either side, the barricades, the pillboxes, then drilling down until plumes of superheated earth shot up from the cracks like geysers.

This was more than warfare. This was, just as the primarch had promised, annihilation. The Blood Angels weren't here to take this place. They were here to destroy it, to raze it, to leave every wall demolished and every avenue ripped out.

I couldn't take my eyes off it. Every time I squinted through the viewers, I saw more acts of extremity. Much of the macro-scale destruction had been dealt out by heavy armour, but the infantry was everywhere too. They didn't need to be, I guessed. They could have sat back and let the tanks blow the enemy defences apart, but they chose to get up close, to draw their power swords and axes and get stuck in. I could hear their full-throated battle cries even over all the frantic revving and burst-explosions, expressing a kind of manic fury that I'd not have guessed they possessed.

I stole a quick glance at my companion – the one who'd rescued me. He was paying me no attention at all, but peering hard into local-area auspex readings. Every so often, as the gunship banked, he'd look out through the viewports, as if trying to pinpoint something definitive at ground level. The others remained silent, barely moving as we were hurled around in the air. I couldn't understand it – five Space Marines were a priceless asset. Still, they must have had their orders, and I wasn't going to ask any questions just then.

By rights, I should have been terrified, or maybe repulsed. Somehow, though, I wasn't. The adrenaline of the ride had banished my ever-present fatigue, and my heart was pumping hard. I kept watching. I drank it all in – the pace, the scale, the almost comical levels of demolition. I was a part of this. Just a piece of driftwood, held aloft by the riptide of the Legion's fury, but I was *here*, right at the centre of it all. I could write about this, I knew. I could conjure up this picture for the Imperium, both as inspiration and warning.

They are angels in the archaic sense, I found myself rehearsing. *Messengers of a distant Throne, prosecutors of its pitiless law.*

Then the gunship suddenly veered, tilting hard, and I jerked my head up. A wide expanse of ruins briefly opened up across the viewslit, a whole cavalcade of smashed and flickering tower-carcasses. I saw a mighty ziggurat-like edifice rising from the heart of the inferno, dark as beaten lead, still partially intact and extending for more than a kilometre in both axes. Causeways jutted out to connect with vast arched gateways, each throbbing with neon-blue light. The fighting was furious across every surface, spilling across ramparts and parapets and surging down access ramps and hangar gates.

I didn't look at any of those hundreds of individual duels and struggles, despite the fact that the Ylechim were putting up fierce resistance here. Of course they were – this had to be their final palace, their lone remaining command-and-control centre, the seat of their almost-extinct civilisation. I didn't look at any of that because only one sight held any possible attention: *he* was there, this was where he was fighting, leading from the front, delivering the killing blow with his own immaculate hands.

I only got a glimpse. Just a few seconds, before we were hurtling away again to wherever the pilots had been ordered to reach and set down. It was enough, though, because time seemed to dilate whenever he was present. The flying debris appeared to slow, the wavering flames to grind into the mire, all to give him his proper setting, the gallery around the gemstone.

The Keruvim were in action. They were in their heavy Terminator plate, carrying gigantic shields, wielding swords, spears and long-handled axes. They were fighting in difficult terrain – tangles of rebar and blown masonry – and they were simply smashing their way through it, vaporising obstacles and hurling aside barriers. Despite all the confusion and dust-blown haze they maintained tight formation, a circle around a defended

core. I saw Bel Sepatus there, and could hardly believe the transformation in him. All their movements were incredibly fast, given the size of their armour, and that made them all the more horrific – like a nightmare moving at unnatural pace, or a fever dream where time has sped up. They were the bodyguard of their lord, and they fought like it, placing themselves in harm's way, using their individual shields to form a single, arced line of defence.

As for him, for Sanguinius, I don't know how long he'd been fighting. Probably for hours. Maybe days. His armour was no longer gold, but black and red, charred by the flames and stained by the blood he'd already let. Fully extended, his wings looked both magnificent and awful. Their pearlescent sheen had been replaced with a mess of blood and debris, accumulated from his descent into the cauldrons of combat. The structures around him were little more than a tangle of broken struts and spars, radiating out from him in a concave hemisphere, as if he'd crashed into them from above and created the blast wave on impact.

He was surrounded by shattered bodies, all from the ranks of the enemy. Survivors swarmed at him. These were their greatest fighters, clad in heavy ironwork war plate and bearing glittering energy blades, scrapping desperately amidst the debris of their citadel's core. It was as if the Keruvim had admitted only those as a sacrifice, keeping the rabble at bay while their lord dispatched the best of them. Sanguinius rose from the city's wreckage with a single thrust of his bloodied wings, dripping gore and oil from the pinions, shedding broken scraps of enemy armour from the shining tip of his great spear, lashing out with movements so precise and so fast that even establishing cause and effect was hard.

He was unhelmed. Amid all the lattice of energy weapons and flying projectiles, his face was exposed. Its beauty was marred now, masked with dirt and blood, the long hair matted. I got a lone, snatched sighting of his eyes, which were the most terrifying things I had ever seen. The expression in them was beyond anger. I don't know if I even have a word for it – a kind of wild, cold frenzy, only barely held in check by the armour that encased him. He was radiant but terrible, resplendent but panic-inducing. Even as I watched, he ripped apart one of the enemy's greatest champions, smashing its armoured hide into slivers and hurling the carcass back down to the inferno below.

It was only a fragment, and I'm no expert on the ways of combat, but I saw something in that moment that took my breath away – the way he fought, it was too good to be true. He couldn't possibly have been that fast, that perfect, by simply reacting, as we all did, to the evidence of our senses. There was something else going on. It was as if the future unveiled itself to him a little earlier than anyone else, as if he were able to snatch at the curtain of ignorance and pull it back. Maybe only moments, maybe just a few seconds, but it was enough. To go up against Sanguinius was to be faced with a soul acting barely within the laws of time and space, something that bulged at the constraints of matter, that operated a hair's width beyond the possible. It was superhuman. It was *hyper*human.

Then the vision was lost, and we raced onward, and I realised I hadn't drawn breath the whole time. He had spoken so quietly, so reasonably, when in the confines of civilisation. Here, though, in this arena, he had been transformed.

Ever been a soldier?

Maybe that's how it had to be. The galaxy was a dangerous place, and we had to be thankful the primarchs were on our side in the struggle for mastery of it. It must have put the fear of false gods into those who faced it.

Before I could reflect on it any further, maybe think about how I might put the experience into words, the gunship dropped sharply.

'There,' snapped the Space Marine, the one with the eye device on his pauldron.

I didn't see what he had noticed, but the remainder of the Blood Angels readied their weapons. The gunship fell hard, angling through incoming torrents of las-fire, before crashing to the ground in a cloud of dust and mud splatters. The doors cracked open, and my deliverer lumbered out. Just before he left, he turned to one of his warriors. 'Stay with him.'

Then he was gone, along with all but one of my companions. I got a view of the ruins beyond, burning freely and strewn with torn metal and masonry. I saw refuse-clogged avenues between collapsed structures, and a sky lit with kaleidoscopes of ordnance. The wall of noise was still crushing – booms and crashes and the keening howl of engines under stress – but something else cut through it. A screaming, I thought, but almost non-human, like an animal being slaughtered. I couldn't make out where it was coming from, but the Blood Angels raced off into the flickering gloom towards it.

Then the doors closed. My now lone companion looked at me. I looked back at him.

‘What was that?’ I asked.

He didn’t reply. Of course he didn’t.

The gunship lifted off again, powering up from the roiling quagmire it had just created, and we were speeding deeper in. The viewports filled up with smoke, and I lost my view of the city. We carried on travelling, faster and faster. I began to wonder if we’d ever stop. I felt sick again, perhaps a delayed reaction to the shock of being pulled out of the mud, or of seeing the primarch up close, or one of a hundred other reasons.

I didn’t like battles, I decided. It was lucky then, I thought, that the ones who had to fight them so clearly did.

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SEVEN

The gunship put down again less than an hour later, and they let me out. The fighting didn’t last much longer than that, at least in that segment of the city. I stumbled into a world of fog and bitter-tasting smoke, drearily cooling down as the last of the explosions echoed away.

I dropped to my haunches, worried I might throw up. What did you do, if you vomited in one of these suits? What if you were in a tox-cloud and couldn’t take the helm off? Thankfully, I managed to keep control. The Blood Angel who had been silently keeping an eye on me no longer seemed interested in staying close to hand. The danger had passed. They had seen to that.

I walked away from the landing site, not sure what I was doing or where I ought to be going. I’d wanted to observe, to get a sense of how they fought, but had succeeded only in nearly dying and then missing most of the action. Now the bulk of the killing was over – the smouldering streets around me were already being patrolled by Legion scour-teams, rooting through the embers for survivors.

I decided to try to get some kind of overview, to salvage something that I could use when I came to record it all for posterity. I limped along a wide thoroughfare, its base heaped with the broken bodies of the slain and strewn with the wreckage of Ylechim vehicles, before coming across the semi-

intact shell of a large building, one that still commanded views over what remained of the rest of the city. I found an open doorway, slipped inside, then clambered up an internal stairway. I went up several storeys before finally emerging at the summit – a wide chamber with every window smashed. A few bodies lay in the corners, none of them moving. They weren't warriors, by the look of them – just citizens of this unfortunate place, caught up in its unwanted liberation.

You can always tell the victims of Space Marines. A standard lasgun leaves a fairly discreet wound, a puncture hole where the energy burns into fabric and skin, but the weapons used by the Legions aren't like that. A bolt-round is an explosive, and has explosive effects. The blades they use are gigantic, frequently sheathed in fearsome energies. They obliterate bodies. They slice them into chunks, rip them apart, throw the pieces around. I didn't look too closely at the corpses in that place, because I knew what I'd see – a collection of butcher's remnants, slowly seeping away in prodigious slicks of blood.

I picked my way through the rubble until I was at the very edge of the chamber, where the windows would have been before being blown to smithereens. I brushed the worst of the glass slivers away with my sleeve, and rested my elbows on the sill.

A hot, humid wind buffeted me. I saw a colour-drained vista of mud-slicks and blackened ruins. It looked like some huge and oily sea had surged up to dissolve the entire place. A few buildings still stood, but most were either demolished or on fire. I could just about make out the enormous structure that Sanguinius had been busy in – that was wreathed in smoke now, occasionally lit up by secondary detonations. Here and there I caught a glimpse of the Blood Angels at work still – tactical squads pushing their way methodically down avenues, firing sparsely. Atmospherics buzzed the scene, some hovering to provide air support to ground units, others strafing distant targets. The noises of proper combat were a long way off now – dull crumps and booms as the Auxilia pressed through the straggling northern outworks.

I couldn't see any sign of the primarch. I also couldn't see where the Blood Angel who'd rescued me had gone. His squad had disappeared into the mazes of jagged wall-tops, hunting whatever it was he had detected from the air.

I couldn’t even decide what to think. On the one hand, the display was undeniably impressive. Clinical, even. Every plan they had devised had been enacted with the same kind of artistry they extended to all their endeavours. They had given all the warnings they possibly could, holding back, holding back, until the moment had come and they had done just as they had promised they would do. No deception. No tricks.

On the other hand, the scale of the destruction was, if I’m honest, sickening. These were humans. Our kind. Survivors of the darkest period in our long history. Was the punishment proportionate? How many would be left alive to rebuild the world, once the Angels had finished their work?

Maybe that didn’t matter. No doubt millions could be shipped in to take the place of those who’d died. The important thing was that the crusade continued to expand, to enfold every last vestige of humanity’s old domains and bring them kicking and screaming into the new age of Unity.

I swallowed uneasily. The air was already beginning to taste fouler. A lot of bodies lay in this place, and the incinerators and biohazard teams had not yet got to work. I reckoned I’d seen enough for now – somewhere, somehow, there had to be a lander that could take me up to the ships in orbit.

I went back down the empty stairwells, picking my way past refuse and shell-cases. Once back at ground level, I went aimlessly, headed roughly northwards, not really paying attention to my surroundings. My stomach felt empty, my head was light. Above me, the sky was getting darker, shadowed by gathering clouds that looked ready to unload. Rain might be a good thing – it would wash the filth out, ready for someone else to start again.

As the light faded and the smell got worse, I lost my way. Of course I did. Everything I did, everything I touched, seemed cursed that day. I tried to retrace my steps back to the transport, and ended up in a place that looked like it had been pummelled worse than the rest. Hardly a stone lay in its place. The ground was an undulating seascape of rubble, some of it still hot, and my boots slipped and scraped as I tried to crest the waves.

I was almost out of the far side when I slipped badly, skittering down a long slope of burned stone before grinding to a dusty halt. I put my hand out to steady myself and my gauntlet hit something soft and yielding. I looked down to see a body half-buried in the rubble. It belonged to one of the city’s inhabitants, one of its soldiers, clad in that familiar dark metal

armour but with the helm knocked off. Unlike the casualties I'd encountered earlier, this one hadn't suffered catastrophic wounds. In fact, I couldn't see any major trauma at all; the armour plates were more or less intact. The man's face, though, was horrific. His skin was white – white as spoiled milk – and almost translucent. I could see sinews under the surface, withered and dry. His eyes bulged from their sockets, his cheeks were sucked in and tight to the bone. My hand had connected with his exposed throat, and when I jerked it back, the imprints of my fingers remained in place.

For a moment I just stared at it. I couldn't see how the man had died. Chem-weapons of some kind? Maybe, though I hadn't been warned to stay clear of any discharges. He reminded me of an old vid-book I'd once seen of a spider draining its prey of its vital juices. The expression on that dried-up face was one of absolute panic – a static scream that was frozen in place forever.

My wits returned, and I pushed the husk away, then scrambled back up the scree-slip. By the time I got to the top, I was shaking. My nausea came back with a vengeance, and this time I knew I was going to retch for sure. I managed to unclasp my helm with trembling fingers and got my rebreather out of the way just in time. Then I bent double and heaved up onto the muddy floor.

When I was finished, I wiped my mouth, stood up again, tried to recover my composure. My head was hammering; I needed something to drink.

For the first time, I was breathing the air of that world unfiltered. The dust and chemicals were acrid, and I fumbled for my rebreather again. Before I replaced it, though, I got a good long whiff of how the place stank – humans, tens of thousands of them, festering the torpid air, their sightless eyes staring up at the heavens as if for deliverance, which was ironic, because that's where their problem had come from.

I blinked hard. I swallowed my bile down. I tried to get myself together again, started to walk, to stumble. I was safe, I knew that. No enemies remained here, no threats to my person. I just had to get out now.

But all I could see, as I stumbled onward in search of something to lift me out of that place, was the face, the hollow face, the staring eyes and the pulled-tight cheeks. And I knew that I'd never be free of it, and that wherever I went after that, I'd still see it.

I'd got too close. Far too close. And already I could sense that I'd struggle to get out again.

When he found me, Bel Sepatus wasn't pleased. His evident view – that we remembrancers were a distraction at best and a danger at worst – had only been reinforced by my venturing off on my own. He hadn't wanted to come after me at all, I was sure; he had a hundred better things to be doing and was anxious to be doing them.

He found me, all the same. I don't remember where I'd got to by then, but I do remember the descent of his shuttle. He put it down almost on top of me, as if to punish me for giving him a headache.

By then I knew a lot more about Bel Sepatus. I knew that he was extremely influential, extremely ambitious, extremely dangerous. He was wearing Terminator armour this time, which made him even more ludicrously bulky than before. As he descended from the shuttle to get me, his heavy treads made the stone crack. The air itself fizzed from all the excess heat being given off from the reactor at his back. You could almost forget there was a person at the heart of all that heaped-up ceramite, and just see the machine exterior, the pipes and the vents, the pistons and the motors. Perhaps that was why these people decorated every battle-suit so carefully – to remind themselves that, in some highly attenuated way, these were still things for humans to wear.

'Are you hurt?' he demanded.

I shook my head. 'Just looking around.'

'You could have been killed.'

'It's my job.'

He snorted, expressing perfectly what he thought of that. Then he grabbed me by the arm, not gently, and hauled me to the shuttle. He pushed me up the ramp, and I wasn't stupid enough to try to resist. We took off, and were soon angling over the city again.

'It went well, then,' I offered.

'By the primarch's will,' he said, curtly.

I still hadn't got used to the way they spoke about him. Widera, and all other humans, were respectful enough, but for the Space Marines it went beyond that. It wasn't *worship,* exactly – which wouldn't have been tolerated anyway – but it wasn't entirely removed from that. Certainly, the total lack of doubt was striking. I'd spoken to Army officers who'd clearly held their superiors in contempt even when following their orders, but I

doubted that Bel Sepatus could even conceive of second-guessing his primarch. The link of authority was so powerful, so complete, that each individual warrior could be seen as an adjunct of their master's singular will. They were genetically linked, after all, and steeped in a culture of total and unquestioning obedience.

I could see the advantages of that. I thought, even then, that I could see the disadvantages too.

'Were you fighting with him?' I asked.

Bel Sepatus grunted irritably, but he did answer. Perhaps he'd been given orders to be helpful. 'Close to him, yes.'

'What's it like?'

He looked at me, nonplussed. He didn't reply for a moment. I thought maybe I'd offended him, or that he somehow didn't understand quite what I meant. When he finally answered me, it was a far fuller response than I'd expected.

'They tell me you have some art,' he said. 'You would have to, to be in the position you occupy. That is your point, is it not? So imagine, every time you pick up a quill, you find yourself in the presence of the greatest writer who ever lived. A creator so peerless and immaculate that anything you produce, by contrast, must appear to you shabby and unworthy. And every time you try to emulate that art, to mimic it, you must always fall short, because only one soul in all creation can possibly be so perfect. And then imagine that you cannot even walk away from that vocation, take up something else, because you have been made, down to every last molecule, for this one purpose alone. You are trapped, pursuing your objective, knowing that you must fail, and every time, no matter what you do, the evidence of your shortcoming will be right in front of you. But you venerate the artistry, all the same. More than that – you *love* it. And thus you are torn. Shame, because you can never ascend the pinnacle. Adoration, because you see it for what it is. A kind of unreality. Sanctioned magic.'

I just looked at him while he spoke. The voice was as dispassionate as ever, and of course I couldn't see his face.

'It is like that,' said Bel Sepatus.

'So it… *pains* you?'

'Because of the possibilities he reveals.'

'I don't understand that,' I told him, truthfully. 'I don't understand you. Everything you do, everything you are. You have all the gifts, but it

seems… torturous, somehow.’

‘Transfiguration comes only through suffering.’

I wondered if that was a Baalite expression. It might well have been, given that place’s history. Or maybe it was something he’d come up with himself. He was a surprisingly intense soul – perhaps they all were.

The shuttle began to slow down, and I realised we were coming into land again. No doubt my host had somewhere important to be, once I’d been shuffled off back into safety.

‘The one who came to get me,’ I said, knowing my time with him was running out. ‘I didn’t recognise his insignia. An eye inside a flame. What was that?’

The interior shuddered as we dropped to earth. Bel Sepatus looked at me with his unknowable helm mask, as beautiful as it was fearsome.

‘There are many designations,’ he said.

‘But which one was it?’

The landing gear hit, and we both swayed with the impact. He got up, opened the door, made ready to leave. I saw other members of the Legion moving around outside, as well as other ships waiting to take off.

‘Go back to the fleet now, remembrancer,’ he said, clunking heavily down the ramp and not looking back. ‘You have the run of the archives, I am told, so if you have questions, you can find the answers there.’

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EIGHT

Full compliance took several weeks to complete. Smashing the enemy's main defences had been the easy part, now the harder work began. Despite my worst fears while wandering the city, this was not an act of conscious genocide – most of the planet's substantial population had survived the ferocious bombardment, and would now be pressed into service to new masters. For all that, their independent institutions – their armies, their government, their administrative classes – had been completely erased.

An expeditionary fleet contained all the resources within itself to impose a new system of governance. The Mechanicum creation-ships would drop whole manufactoria down, all packaged up and modularised and ready to assemble themselves according to standard patterns. Political education officers would be sent down in battalions, each one primed to expound and disseminate the Imperial Truth to a newly cowed citizenry. The staff of the new governor's department would be heavily made up of incomers, each of whom knew how the vast inter-planetary bureaucracy worked, how to requisition the resources they needed, and how to build up the recruitment base that was, in truth, the main thing the Imperium now required of them. Months of work lay ahead to get all that put in place, but it was striking just how quickly these people worked. They'd done it before, on hundreds of other worlds, and by now the routine was deeply entrenched. Give it a

decade or two, and Ylech would be just another point on the cartographs, another node in the glittering web of domains that spread steadily across the entire galaxy.

I went back up to the *Red Tear*, and planned to stay there for as long as everything took. The cities would have the smell of death on them for some time yet, even once the clean-up teams had been through them, so I didn't fancy making a second trip. I wrote up some notes – observations of how the battles had seemed to me. I didn't think many people would be interested in reading them, mostly because such accounts must have been very common in an Imperium that had been at war for as long as it had existed. I wrote about him too, of course. That one sight of him. As much as I could remember.

I continued to study what remained of the Blood Angels' military operations. I watched from a distance, through scopes, auspexes and cartolith projections, as the primarch led his troops against the increasingly feeble holdouts. It was a fascinating experience. You could see, if you dialled the instruments correctly and focused the lenses carefully, the entire operation unfolding in real time. You could pick out the individual squads, the armoured support, the air cover, all moving together in that impeccably choreographed ballet that was so very hard to counter.

The more I watched those points of light, the position runes and the vector lines, the more I saw the patterns. All of the units, whether it be dozens or hundreds or thousands, moved in relation to the single dot at the centre – the primarch who led them. It was more than just response to commands, I began to realise. The whole thing was a single organism, a living creature with limbs, lungs and a heart. The points of light moved naturally, spontaneously. I knew there would be tangible communications going on down there, but I saw that it had to be more than that. The responses were too immediate, too unconscious. He was a part of them, and they were a part of him, and the link that bound them all was tighter than I'd ever have guessed.

I couldn't study those feeds forever, though. What was more, some of the results from the intra-fleet comms net I'd tailored for my studies were strange – some ships had already left Ylech, even though I knew that no reassignment was scheduled for weeks. I couldn't determine who or what was on those ships, and no one was able – or willing – to tell me. I made a note of it all, and promised that I'd look it up. I was beginning to have a

nagging feeling that, despite all the invitations to enquire, plenty was going on under the surface that people were either unaware of or wouldn't talk about. They were a secretive people, I was beginning to realise, as much by inclination and temperament as anything else. They preferred to live underground, away from the heat and sickness of the sun. They fashioned masks to wear, and decorated them with loving care.

Perhaps I should have pushed harder at that intuition, but by then I was struggling to work again. I couldn't write more than short bursts, and my brief exposure to the reality of the battles had left my nerves frayed. Sleep was as elusive as ever. I took to walking the endless corridors of the flagship during the noctis-shifts, lost in a fog of fatigue and with my head hammering. My dreams were becoming far too florid for comfort, and they no longer acted as an inspiration but made me feel strangely wretched. The primarch was still in them, but no longer with his serene gaze. He was vengeful now, and mired in dirt and gore. I tried to put such images out of my mind – they weren't helpful.

It's commonplace to describe those places, those great ships, as cities in space. The *Red Tear* was beyond that – it was a world of its own, a totally enclosed iron-and-steel planetoid with its own history, nations and cultures. Tens of thousands – at least – crewed its upper levels. A similar number dwelled in its dank and echoing bilges. Some parts of that ship were so rarely visited that I suspected most of the regular crew didn't even know they existed. The transition could be profound – one moment you were in the lamplit officer-staffed decks, where the crew saluted you as you passed them and all was smart and efficient. The next, you were in a world of shadows and malfunctioning lumens, the decks sticky with spilt oils, the thrum of the engines oppressive and all-consuming. Most of the bulkhead doors would open down there, but plenty were jammed or locked. You could get lost quickly, and find yourself in gloomy recesses with old paintings peeling from the walls. The inhabitants of those regions didn't look you in the eye, but scurried off like rats. Some looked as sick as I felt. Some looked sicker.

It was inevitable, I supposed. The glorious front couldn't be maintained everywhere, and nothing could be immaculate all the way down. Still, I was frustrated to find so many chambers off limits, and was struck by the unnerving atmosphere of the deep places. At times I would catch the eye of someone before they melted away into darkness. They weren't hostile, not

exactly, but they weren't welcoming either. I thought they were afraid. Maybe very afraid, and I didn't know why, because no threats to them could have existed here, not on the Angel's own void-palace.

I couldn't hang around too long down there, which was maybe for the best. I needed to remain in places with steady lumens and clean air. I didn't know how much of that was my usual run of ailments, and how much was a hangover from the things I'd seen on the planet's surface, but I wondered if Widera was right, and I'd been affected by Baal's poisons somehow. I'd taken all the countermeasures, but something might have slipped through. I took more medication and hoped it would kick in.

To keep myself occupied, I did as Bel Sepatus had suggested, and visited the ship's archives. The main record chamber was a magnificent place, as well appointed as any librarium on any civilised world. It was a high-domed space, maybe fifty metres up, the walls lined with shelves from floor to ceiling. The many terraces were of polished wood, the spiral staircases marble, the fine fittings bronze and gold. Suspensors floated like jewels amid the warm haze. Menials padded to and fro collecting books for the scholars to look at. It was never very busy, and the long, polished tables were mostly empty whenever I visited. Sometimes a member of the Legion would be present, perhaps one of their newly limited Librarians, poring over some treatise or other. I occasionally saw others of senior rank, there to study history or analyse tactical reports from other theatres.

Nothing I unearthed got me any closer to deciphering the meaning of the sigil of the eye. The way the Blood Angels decorated their armour was in any case highly individual – I suspected that only a fraction of the marks visible on their battleplate were part of official schemes, but instead reflected personal aesthetic or cultural choices. Any attempt I made to enquire about the mysterious symbol came to nothing. I began to wonder if I'd imagined it – things had been confused down there, after all.

It was while I was busy with that, surrounded by heaps of heavy books that told me lots about the heraldry of the old clans on Baal Secundus, that Widera came back. As she sat opposite me, I realised how long it had been since we'd spoken. She looked well. Glowing, in fact.

'Keeping busy?' she asked me.

'Very. How about you?'

She brought out a portable projector, adjusted it, and conjured up a two-dimensional projection. It was her latest project, a half-finished portrait of

the primarch at war.

She was good. Very good. The likeness was impressive, the composition excellent. But it wasn't *him.* It wasn't the avatar of destruction I'd witnessed on the surface, his wings dripping and his eyes ablaze. This was a serene effigy of gold and silver, floating seemingly without effort over a battlefield of steadily advancing Blood Angels. I didn't see much evidence of the death and wreckage that choked the ruins either – just an almost bloodless assault that was leaving the towers more or less intact.

'What do you think?' she asked.

I tried to find something nice to say. 'It's… beautifully done.'

She laughed. 'You hate it.'

'No, I–'

'I know why.' She leaned close, smirking. 'Your commitment to the truth. Your mentality. You don't like to see things made to look nice.'

'Well, I–'

'But what do you think we're doing here, eh? Why do you think our hosts even tolerate us? To say whatever we want? Ha. You're amusing to me.'

So this was going to be a lecture. I let her talk.

'This has to succeed. It has to. And it only succeeds because there are a hundred worlds supplying this fleet, all of them churning out guns and ships and support regiments. Every manufactorum line has prints of these images hanging over them, and those prints need to be the kind of thing that keeps them stamping the shell-cases and stitching the epaulettes. They don't need your grime and nuance. They need something to get them up in the morning and off to the first shift.'

'I just think… well, he's already impressive enough.'

'Is he? Maybe. But an image has to be simple. Flawless. Something you can repeat, verbatim, the same on every world it's found on.'

'I get that.'

'But you'll be different, right? You'll write things up as they *really* are.'

I shrugged. 'I mean, you were the one who picked me. You knew what I'd done before.'

'Your name's known. It'll get you readers. And when they see that you – *you* – have come around to all this, have seen the light about the crusade, it'll have a value.'

I smiled grimly. 'So that's what this was. Not my talent.'

‘You’ve got plenty of that too. You just need to use it now.’

I nodded. I thought about it. ‘Thing is, though, I’ll have to scratch that scab. I’ll have to lift it up and see what’s underneath. Can’t help myself.’ I looked up at her. ‘Don’t worry. He’s astonishing. I can let everyone know that, and there’d be no word of a lie in it. But you must have noticed it. All of them here.’ I looked around, checked we weren’t being obviously overhead. ‘There’s something… *off.*’

Her brow furrowed. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I don’t know. I can’t put my finger on it. They ought to be swaggering. They’re phenomenal. What was it – five days, to conquer that world? That’s insane. They’re not swaggering, though. They walk as if their own shadows are trying to trip them up.’ I raised my eyebrows, spread my hands. ‘Maybe nothing. I don’t know. I haven’t been very well. I just get a sense about them. Not just them. Him.’

She laughed again, disbelievingly. ‘Your standards are pretty high.’

‘Yeah. Don’t misunderstand me. I saw him down there. Awe-inspiring. Literally. But do you ever…’ I trailed off. I didn’t even know what I was trying to say. ‘There’s so much I can’t get at. Things they won’t tell me. Ships have gone back to Baal – you know that? They didn’t have any markers, nothing on the schedules. I only found out because it got picked up on a combat feed I’d tinkered with. And I got rescued by this warrior, and no one even seems to know he existed, but I’m sure he did. They’re not being straight with me. Maybe you too.’

I thought she’d scoff at all that. It sounded pathetic, and I was the one speaking. She didn’t scoff, though. ‘You can talk to him, you know,’ she said. ‘You have that favour.’

‘I don’t know if I’d dare it.’

‘You should. It’s why you’re here.’

I didn’t like the thought of it. Just being in his presence was intimidating enough, but actually trying to do my job – that was properly daunting. A part of me wanted nothing more than to get back to my cabin, try to get some rest, maybe erase all the notes in my journal.

His wings, though, had been covered in blood.

‘I’ll think about it,’ I said.

He looked at me with those soulful eyes. They weren’t blazing with fury any more. Looking back at them then, I could barely reconstruct what his expression had been like before. I couldn’t imagine it. He seemed as if he

never got angry, like one of the graven images in his extensive statue-gardens, or maybe one of Widera's portraits. Cool, serene, immovable.

'Few people ask me of those days any more,' Sanguinius said. 'They seem like another age to me now.'

We were alone, in one of his many private chambers. I'd seen a few of those by then. They were all exquisite. Not austere as you might have expected from a warrior-general, but supremely luxurious, kitted out with objects that were both refined and rare. The placement of them, the schemes of colour and form, it was all impeccable. He was a collector, this primarch, but not a greedy or an indiscriminate one. I'd seen his home world – its richly hued deserts and its poisoned skies – and guessed that the arid aesthetic informed his choices. He had been raised in abject poverty, and now enjoyed riches. He could be allowed that, surely.

'I'm sure your recall is perfect,' I said.

We were sitting in semi-darkness, lit only by half a dozen jewelled suspensors. Sanguinius had a goblet of wine in his hand, but hadn't offered any to me. I wondered if it was the thing Eris had told me about – karash.

He wasn't armoured. He wore white robes, a red cloak artfully cut to allow his wings to unfurl. He sat on a throne made to accommodate him. I sat on a standard size chair, albeit raised up on a small platform so that I wasn't completely dwarfed.

I didn't record the conversation. He'd told me he didn't mind if I did, but I never liked doing it – it had an effect on what people said if they knew it was being transcribed the whole time on to a recitation-core. Still, he knew why I was with the fleet. He knew that I was writing the definitive work on him, the one that Widera hoped would inspire even more bullet-stampers and uniform-stitchers. Perhaps he tailored what he said, but I don't think so. He had, among his many attributes, the power to make you think that he was not only telling you the whole truth, but that he was incapable of doing otherwise. You believed him. And I thought, even then, that this power was perhaps his greatest asset of all. Weapons and strength can take you a long way, but *being believed*, in this most deceptive of ages, carried the promise of bringing the entire galaxy with him.

'I was an infant,' Sanguinius said. 'Barely alive. I opened my eyes, and I remember what I saw. One blink – nothing. Another, and I was somewhere made of light that screamed at me. A third, and I was under a red sun. I didn't even have the word for it then – *sun.* The heat was incredible. I tried

to move – I was in the wreckage of something – and felt the pain of it. I couldn't call for help. I didn't wish to call, in any case. I was not afraid. I was curious, though I sensed the danger. Most of all, curious about myself.'

He took a sip of that dark liquid.

'I wondered about my wings. I wondered why I had them. I wondered how they were to be used.' He smiled. 'Isn't that strange? When you were young, did you ever wonder about your legs, your arms? Of course not. They have always been part of you. But I was conscious, right from the very start, that these things were unnatural. They were the result of something unforeseen. I tell you truly, despite all that I know now, I can't explain their origin. They've never felt a part of me. At times I get the sense that they belong to another soul altogether, and that one day they will be ripped from me and given back to their true owner. Who knows?'

'I read about your time on Baal,' I said. 'What you did to unify it.'

'Unify it.' He looked thoughtful. 'The first ones to discover me became my tribe. The Pure Blood. They bickered, debating whether I should be slain or rescued. I just listened, knowing, even then, that they were no threat to me. They decided to take me in. If they had not, I would have had to kill them all, just as I killed the scorpions and the snakes that infested every inch of the desert. And then maybe the others would have come across me, sooner or later, and perhaps I would have been a monarch of mutants, instead of their persecutor. Because I was a *child*, you see? It was all chance, who found me first. Or something akin to chance. I didn't know what I wanted. I was the first stone of the avalanche, capable of being tumbled by the wind itself. I didn't hate those who had been poisoned and turned into beasts, even later when I was slaughtering them – they were victims of choices made by others, centuries earlier. If anything, I felt a certain kinship with them. My only prospect was to rule a world where every grain of sand was toxic.'

'When I was there, I sensed the poison was still there. I asked why it hadn't been cleansed. I was told that madness was preferable to erasure.'

'Who told you that?'

'Olixa Eris. Of your Auxilia.'

'I'll have to look her up. I like that.' He sat back, letting his limbs relax. 'I won't have Secundus touched. It's where we came from. Poisons give you gifts – if you survive the bite of them, you can survive much else too. You may be gifted visions in your fever. You may become able to transmute

the killing element, to become a vessel of purity. I have never been a king of healthy people. Not like my esteemed brother Roboute, say. I have always been the master of wretches, and have learned from that. I am a wretch myself, a non-standard. To purify and to transform – that has been our gift. We suck in the sickness, we embrace it, and within our souls, it changes into beauty.'

'Just as you did with the Revenant Legion.'

'No, they did that themselves. I learned from my upbringing. When I met them for the first time, long after my father had found me, I asked them to accept me. Not the other way round. The hunted, the strange, the infirm – we have always been the askers, not the demanders. So they understood that. When we began our transformation, I was led by them as much as I imposed anything. They were ready to become stronger. They were ready to transform. And so we did it together.'

I looked around me. You couldn't escape it – all the finery, all the decoration. It was all so spectacular, but it could become numbing, like an over-spiced dish that you had to keep eating. 'And this is the result,' I said.

'There's no secret about it,' Sanguinius said. 'They were the dregs of Terra. They knew that. It plagued them, even when their bodies had been transformed. Just like the Blood, they needed another kind of transfiguration, the soul as well as the body. They turned their minds to creation, to the accomplishments of civilisation, and in doing so purged the sickness.'

'And it worked, did it?'

He looked directly at me. I struggled not to avert my eyes immediately. Even just a few moments being scrutinised by him were enough to make my palms damp and my heartbeat quicken. 'What do you mean?'

'You changed them. For good.'

It took him a long time before he replied. 'We are now what we have always been,' he said, carefully. 'We did not move into another category – we improved on what was already there.'

'But you remain different. Set apart.'

'In what way?'

I hesitated, trying to find the right words. 'I saw you fight. I can't get the images out of my head. It was as if… you could see something none of us could. Ahead of time. Like you had privileged access.'

Sanguinius nodded. ‘That gift,’ he said. ‘Far more valuable than the wings I wear. But don’t think of it as infallible. It is a weak facility, as faulty as often as it tells true.’ He ran his fingertip around the rim of his goblet. ‘Foresight. Sometimes of concrete things – the way an enemy moves, the curve of an axe – sometimes of more nebulous things. The shape of the crusade. The fate of a soul.’

‘That must make you almost invulnerable.’

Sanguinius shrugged. ‘Not really. A vision can lead you into error. Or even if it is true, you can take the wrong path by seeking to achieve it. It can come to obsess you – you see a fate you wish to avoid, and in preventing it you cause greater harm. Or you become possessed by longing for something good, and put aside your duty to achieve it, and in doing so lose yourself. It has its uses, but I do not see it as a blessing.’

‘Then do you see what the future holds for yourself?’

‘No. At least, not yet.’

‘For the Imperium?’

‘In no great detail. Believe me, fractured glimpses of possibilities are mostly less useful than nothing.’

‘Some of the time, sure. Still, it must be invaluable on occasion.’

‘It has been. It will be again.’

‘All in the service of the Legion.’

‘Which will continue to evolve.’

‘Until you are paragons, admired by all the Imperium.’

‘We have already earned the reputation.’

‘I agree. But you work a little too hard at it, don’t you?’ My stomach tightened. I didn’t know why I was pushing this. ‘I mean, the gold. The enamel, the lacquer. It’s like you *want* us to think it’s a mask.’

Sanguinius smiled. Throne, his smile was so agreeable. ‘A plaster face over something less refined.’

‘We all project. We all have things, deep down, we’d like to keep under wraps.’

‘So we do.’ He put the goblet down, placed his hands together. ‘But where’s this coming from, remembrancer? Just your usual fondness for finding fault in those who fight on your behalf, or something more specific?’

‘I was rescued on Ylech by a warrior of your Legion. One with an eye within a flame on his armour. What is that?’

‘One of the Ofanim. One of the orders of the First Sphere.’

‘No one talks about them.’

‘No, they do not. They are charged with watching over their brothers.’

‘For what?’

‘Lapses in discipline. Failures of control.’

‘I’ve seen your Legion fight. They wouldn’t refuse an order. Least of all from you.’

‘All institutions police themselves. The Imperial Army does. My brothers’ Legions do so. It is hardly uncommon.’

I was getting tired. Unreasonably tired. The ache behind my temples kept getting worse, and even the subdued light from the suspensors made my eyes water.

‘But there is a fear in your sons,’ I said, cautiously, fearful that I said too much, or was simply wrong. ‘Those who should feel no fear, by rights, carry doubt about something. Maybe they don’t even know what it is, or for what reason.’ I blinked hard. ‘Maybe others have it too. Maybe others sense it. I mean, you weren’t made Warmaster.’

That spilled out unbidden. I wasn’t even sure where it came from. For the first time, Sanguinius looked taken aback. ‘That is true.’

‘Why not?’ I had gone all in now, so I just pressed on. ‘No one could ever tell me why.’

‘My father was not required to state a reason.’

‘The most beloved of them all. The one that the people looked up to. The most popular of your brotherhood, with a combat record to match the very best. I never understood it. Did it not hurt, to miss out? Was it unjust? Or is there something we’re all missing here?’

‘You are looking for something that does not exist. My brother Horus was always first among equals, just as he still is.’

‘So they never gave you an explanation.’

He was about to reply to that. I could see the response forming on his lips. I felt he was about to tell me something he had not spoken of before, or maybe only rarely. I don’t know why I had that certainty – I may be imagining it with hindsight.

In any case, it didn’t come. A faint bleep indicated an urgent incoming message, and he looked away. A vox-feed at his collar lit up, and I could hear the faint sound of someone relaying information. I couldn’t catch most

of the words – Sanguinius calmly asked for clarification, pressed on a few points. Then, finally, he said, ‘Play the audex for me.’

And that I did hear. I’ve never forgotten it, for it meant that we would not be here for long at all. The trivial contest of Ylech would soon be forgotten, not just by us, but by everyone. The words that came over the comm-link, second- or third-hand, were almost inaudible, the product of a soul operating under extreme duress.

‘This. World. Is. Murder.’

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NINE

Ever seen a Titan? Any marque, any size. A Warhound. A Warlord. Any of them.

If you have, you'll never forget it. You'll know just what I mean when I try to describe what it is to see them at war.

A Space Marine is bad enough. They were bred to scare, and they do. But a Titan… Where do I even start? They *tower* over the battlefield. And they're human-shaped. They didn't need to be. You could have designed a war machine for the purpose they fulfil in any shape – given it wheels, or tracks, maybe even grav-plates. You could have fashioned the cockpit with layers of shield-scales, given them a dozen gun-arms, filled out the central chambers like a super-heavy tank or a core flyer.

No. They made Titans in the shape of men. They gave them two legs, two arms, a single death-mask head. They gave them talons, they made them hunched and stooped, they gave them two illuminated eyes. They knew what they were doing.

You see one for the first time, and do not quite believe your senses. You see the clouds of smoke roll back – from the barrage it has already unleashed – and see it striding. It is a lopsided movement, a limp, a heavy hauling of limbs that weigh tonnes and tonnes, but it is nonetheless like a human's. You see the low-slung head emerge out of the haze, its rictus

jawline, its gouts of steam, its glowing cockpit windows. For a moment, you think it must be right on top of you, because you can barely make out anything else, but then you see that it is still distant, though lumbering closer, closer, eating up all the light from the sky until only the great vast body remains above you – the stink of Martian reactors, the armour plates clanking and sliding, the blare of war-horns that make the earth crack and the skies shake.

It's more than intimidating, this way. It's terrifying. You understand the term *god-machine*. You know why they named them that way. Because a god is shaped like a mortal. They are us, but greater, more powerful, more enduring. We created gods from metal and fire, and breathed life into them, and bade them walk. And now these new gods do what we order them to, across a thousand battlefields, and we can only gape at them, and feel the fear, the fear that says, *we have made* this. We did it. What else, given sufficient cause, could we also do?

I simply stared at it. It was a Warlord, one of the larger examples. A Warlord of the Legio Mortis, no less, one of the original trinity of machine legions, created on Mars before the Age of the Imperium had even begun. Feared and distrusted as much as they were relied upon and respected, this was an ancient order of killer giants, each one stained with strange rites and echoing with the drone of languages none of us understood.

At its feet were its train of support troops: skitarii, Auxilia, some mobile armour. They were essential, I knew – clustering around the colossal treads to prevent an enemy sneaking under the guns to strike close – but they looked so fragile there, so pointless, like insects swarming under the feet of a predator. I kept expecting them to scatter or disintegrate every time the immense horns roared, or the weapon-arms fired, but they carried on marching, going at full tilt to maintain pace with the ponderous swings of those armoured legs before the treads crashed back into the dust and the next mighty step was taken.

I saw all of this from the viewport of a Chimera transport. This one hadn't been blown up yet, but given what had happened last time my nerves were still a mess. I clutched the restraints tight as it powered onward, pressed my face up against the viewslit to get a glimpse of the world outside. Despite the transport's lurching movements and the confined frame, I had a pretty good look. I saw the reflective glimmer of explosions on the Titan's ebony armour. I tasted the strangeness of another world's

alien air through my helm's systems, masked now by the rearing banks of smoke. I heard the dull roar of an army in motion – the grind of hundreds of engines under stress, the shouts of thousands of warriors on the charge, the crackle of the burning fronds of an alien landscape. Every so often the Titan would fire, and I'd squint against the flare and my stomach would twitch in fearful sympathy. The earth would reel for a split second, the auspexes would all shudder, and then the payload would land and the far horizon would light up.

And the scariest thing was that this monster, this giant of slaughter, was only one of dozens now marching across the smouldering grass remnants, ploughing their way through the curled-dark vegetation and treading the broken stems into the red dust. You could hear the others as they bellowed and belched smoke, swaggering like drunkards, wild and brutal.

Huge forces had been assembled for this engagement. They told me more ships were on the way even now, but that felt superfluous, surely, because this warzone was already clogged with fighters from more than one Legion. I could see the lurid colours of an Emperor's Children Land Raider blast its way through those preternaturally long grasses, followed by a long train of Auxilia armour. On the far side of a furrow in the endless grass, I caught sight of a large formation of Luna Wolves, their bone-white armour blending in eerily with the strange flora of this world.

The Blood Angels were the most numerous. Their Rhinos and Spartans charged up the very centre of great gashes in the landscape created by the Titans' ranged barrage. Those transports were firing too, lighting up the eerie forests and turning the pale stalks black. Flame-throwers vomited out bright spears, kindling the few stands not yet ignited by the energy beams and incendiaries.

On this world at least, it was all about fire. They were burning it to the ground, to damage it all so badly that nothing would ever grow again. On Ylech, the Legion's conduct had been deliberate – a matter of planning, then execution, something they had done many many times before. Now it was a whirl of haste, a flurry of hatred. They were throwing themselves at the enemy, getting as close as they could, leaping free of their vehicles to deploy their blades and fists even as the flames still flickered around them. They looked into the eyes of the xenos – assuming they could find them amid the wreckage – and made sure they knew what was killing them. It was personal. It was vindictive.

I adored them for it. Throne, I wasn't immune. These weren't *us.* These were the aliens, the non-humans, the others. These were what had preyed on us in the years of darkness, who now stood before us and security at last. They were the vermin, the rats in the hold, the disease-carriers. The sooner they were all gone the better.

Surprised to hear that from me? Don't be. You might well feel differently. You might find the attitude unpalatable, but then you have that luxury. I know my history. We were defenceless against them for so long. You can criticise the crusade all you like – and I do – but you need to remember that we weren't swimming in indolence at the start of this: we were on our knees. Every human child knew the stories, of how the skies would darken and the ships would begin to fall and shadows would suddenly produce eyes and fangs and needles.

Revenge. It felt good. I liked it. For as much as I recoiled from what we did to our own kind in the name of Unity, I relished the smell of xenos flesh cooking on the edge of a disruptor.

I think he did, too. I could see him at the very apex of the advance, and for all that the Titans made my hands tremble, his actions were something else again. He soared and he dived, he plunged and he plummeted, all within and around that lattice of fire and plasma. The Legion was firing liberally, making the atmosphere ignite, and he just weaved his complex path through it all, trailing streamers of fire and smoke, a comet given its head, his spear like a star in the gloom, vicious and intense.

They were already reeling, those creatures, those monsters, and to be faced by this, *this*, a son of the Emperor unleashed – it broke them. They screamed. Alien screams, from alien gullets and alien mandibles, raised in a chorus of fear and horror.

He'd been angry before. I'd seen it, and it had chilled me to the bone.

This was different, though. They'd hurt his sons.

My advice, such as it is, to any who might contemplate doing that.

Don't. Just don't.

His name was Khitas Frome. The astropaths had determined that – Throne only knows how.

I've never fully understood astropathy, I'll admit it. Somehow, those poor blind wretches are able to interpret the vague mess of dreams and visions that simmer through the void, sort them into something intelligible, then translate the whole thing into dispatches capable of being interpreted by

non-specialists like me. I felt both a strange kinship and a revulsion for them. Some of their function was like mine, I thought – they were storytellers, or maybe story-interpreters. On the other hand, it was all so strange, so bound up in rituals and safeguards that looked so very suspect in this new reality of enlightenment. We had no machines to do the work they did, but relied on things that sounded a lot like superstition. Whenever I'd pointed this out to fellow scriveners, they'd looked at me blankly.

That's just the way it's done, they'd said. *That's the only way these things work. Do you know any basic astrophysics at all?*

I knew that the distances made transmissions of physical data impossible. Of course I did. But no one could ever explain to me how the alternative – this subconscious business of visions and prophecies – wasn't a violation too. It worked. Maybe that was enough, though I could never reconcile myself to it; once you run your institutions on the basis of *it works* without any scrutiny as to *why*, well, then you're in trouble again.

No one wanted to hear that. They still don't. All they wanted was the relevant facts, delivered to their waiting ears by whatever means necessary. They wanted a name, and they got one. Khitas Frome, a captain of the Legion, leading a force of three full companies. He was dead. Everyone who had made planetfall with him was dead, too.

I remember the shock among the Blood Angels commanders when the full data came in, back on Ylech. It wasn't that casualties were unknown in the war – they certainly weren't – but this had come out of nowhere. Legion forces rarely engaged without reconnaissance and data-gathering. From the astropath's reports, the engagement had looked almost speculative – a gradual drip-feed of troops into a warzone about which very little was known. Perhaps those involved had been deceived. Or perhaps it had been a wholesale miscalculation by the fleet commander. It sounded like a mess, whatever the factors involved.

Sanguinius reacted instantly. It made him furious. He immediately convened a summit of his most senior advisors – Raldoron, Azkaellon, Astian, a couple of dozen others. The *Red Tear*'s captain was present, plus twenty or so of the menial cadres. I managed to tag along, fearful that I'd be expelled at any moment. I never was. Either they were genuinely content to have me there, or so consumed with their desire for punishment that my presence was ignorable.

They met in a larger chamber, one lit by stands of candles and adorned with banners carried in previous campaigns. As we entered the room, I felt the faint prickle of sensor-bafflers across my skin. Once the heavy bronze doors were closed, even the noise of the warship's engines – ever-present on most decks – was eradicated. The Astartes stood in a loose circle, Sanguinius at the far end, the menials and me set back further into the shadows.

'Any additional information?' the primarch asked Canio, his master of signals.

'Limited data on xenos forces,' Canio replied. 'Megafauna, arachnid in appearance, composed of several interdependent clades. No confirmed higher-order intelligence, but highly responsive and supremely aggressive. Further information has been demanded.'

'And we are done here?' Sanguinius asked, turning to Raldoron.

'Not quite,' the First Captain replied. 'Several provinces are yet to be pacified – the Auxilia will not be able to handle them all. Muster plans for Kayvas are also advanced.'

Sanguinius nodded, then bowed his head in thought. I'd heard others talk about Kayvas a lot as the battles for Ylech had gradually died out. That was the next big thing, the major engagement that Nikaea had delayed, one against the enemy who had always been the most persistent and dangerous – the greenskins. The Luna Wolves had been earmarked to prosecute the campaign, just one of the many post-Ullanor mop-up operations, but few doubted it would become a multi-Legion undertaking. Given Sanguinius' and Horus' closeness, the Blood Angels were already champing at the bit to make a move.

'Those plans will remain where they are for now,' Azkaellon said, dryly. 'The Warmaster has already translated to One-Forty-Twenty.'

'Always ahead, my brother,' breathed Sanguinius, before looking up, clasping his hands together. 'His presence is welcome, as is that of the Third, but honour demands vengeance. We shall go.'

A few nods, murmurs of assent.

'We cannot outrun the others,' Sanguinius said, 'not if estimates of their positions are accurate, but we can come in close behind. I do not wish outsiders to destroy those who did this.'

There it was again, that ready slip into sudden coldness. One moment, as warm and genial as anything, the next something baser, more elemental. In

both cases the trigger was the same – the affront against honour, the insult of an unworthy kill. I thought then that this was something essential to them. Their fury in war was not random, not a matter of temperamental instability. It had rules, it had boundaries, but it was also sunk deep into older ideas. Vengeance, martial codes, brotherhood. I wondered which legacy gave them that – Baal, or Terra.

'The *Red Tear* leaves now,' Sanguinius said. 'Others will follow once operations here are concluded – First Captain, you will draw up the orders.'

Raldoron bowed.

'We shall burn the engines,' Sanguinius concluded, his voice lowering. 'And then we shall burn that world. No quarter given, no xenos left alive.'

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TEN

Megarachnids, they were called. The name suited them, though it didn't fully convey their true repulsive alienness. Even the most basic clades were huge, far taller and heavier than a Space Marine. They had eight limbs, four of which they used to scamper through their abominable forests of hissing grass, four of which were armed with wickedly sharp blades that were perfectly capable of slicing through ceramite. I could never tell just where their chitinous bodies finished and their armour started. It wasn't clear to me where such armour even came from – we never discovered manufactoria on their world, even after committing so much of it to cleansing flame.

They were more than animals, though; that was certain. They communicated with one another, they laid traps, they mirrored our tactics. Their appetite for violence seemed virtually infinite, and they were never cowed or daunted even by our most intense assaults. The deeper we pushed into their world, the more we destroyed the strange semi-biological nodes that appeared to control its violent weather, the more they came at us. I saw for myself the greater clades in action – the winged swarms of carnivorous horrors, the bulkier swollen striders that sacrificed raw speed for immense armour plates. Rumours even abounded of Titan-sized monsters lurking

deeper in the endless thickets, ones that could go up against the Warlords that had so impressed me on my first trip to the front.

All of us, myself included, quickly understood what had driven Khitas Frome close to despair. Everything about the place was hostile. The flora was vile, choking out light and enclosing every battlefield inside a suffocating curtain of rigid, weblike branches. The weather was actively dangerous, churning in colossal electrical storms that scrambled sensors and made resupply impossible. Even the destruction of the great bone-trees, which had some hard-to-determine link to the weather systems, was not a foolproof way to guarantee protection – entire companies could be isolated and hard-pressed if a storm front moved in without warning.

So it was that the Legion tactics were relentlessly scaled up. Frome's initial landings, in hindsight, had been pitiably small, leaving infantry squads vulnerable to rapid and coordinated attacks by waves of the xenos. The commanders learned quickly, making use of the assets that arrived in orbit one after the other. First came the mobile armour, landed in great danger only once breaks in the storms had been effected by ground troops. Once the war machines were in place, scorched-earth tactics could begin in earnest. I have no idea exactly how many containers of promethium were dropped down to the surface of One-Forty-Twenty, but it must have been lakes and lakes of it. The holds of void-tankers were emptied, siphoned off into heavy landers and sent spiralling down to the heavily guarded compounds we'd carved out in the heart of those eerie forests. Then the flamer-teams would fan out, driving their tank columns deep into the brakes and the defiles, putting it all to the torch and filling the air with billowing clouds of raw black. Only when huge tracts had been systematically cleared did the tech-priests allow the Titans to be brought down, after which the killing power ramped up exponentially.

Of all the weapons we delivered, though, the most effective in all circumstances were the Space Marine companies. Ylech had been a trivial thing for them to accomplish, but here they were up against enemies just as deadly and just as powerful as they were. They rose to the occasion. I witnessed actions from all three Legions present, and could barely choose between them. The Emperor's Children struck me as the most calculating – they were as happy to engage at range as they were to get up close, and chose their tactics well in all cases. The Luna Wolves were more aggressive, often foregoing scheduled artillery strikes in order to get at the

xenos faster. The edge, though, had to go to the Blood Angels, who fought throughout the whole episode with an almost unrestrained brutality. It was personal, for them, and it remained so during the full extent of the campaign. They lost many more warriors across the conflict than the three companies that had initially sparked it, but that didn't matter. It wasn't individual deaths that spurred them, but the principle, the dent to their honour. They weren't a sentimental people – they knew their destiny was to die in battle, but the *manner* of it was important. A good death. A noble death. Not one precipitated by slovenly planning or unclear objectives.

I didn't remain on the surface for very long. Three visits, each watched over by Legion serfs, all from the relative safety of Army transports. The last one is the one that remains in my memory. It was one of the really big pushes, the ones designed to break the resolve of an enemy that seemed immune from lapses in morale. Intelligence had reported a significant build-up of xenos on a high ridge some two hundred kilometres east of the current front line. Experience had taught our commanders that airborne assaults were extremely dangerous – the atmospheric disturbances put our flyers at a disadvantage when they were invariably mobbed by the winged clades of the xenos. To mitigate this, the plan was to airlift companies of Blood Angels and Luna Wolves to within twenty kilometres of the xenos concentrations. Those regions had not been burned-out yet, so the infantry would have to push fast through thickly overgrown territory, climb the ridge and engage along the length of the summit.

That would be challenging, even for Astartes. The likelihood was they'd be detected and engaged before they hit the high ground, meaning hard fighting in unfavourable territory. When Bel Sepatus told me the plans, I must have looked startled.

'You'll be hammered,' I said.

He didn't look impressed. Then again, Bel Sepatus didn't choose to talk to me for my tactical acumen. 'It is achievable,' he said. 'In any case, the primarchs will be leading us.'

He said it so matter-of-factly. For me, though, that made an observation essential. I hadn't met Horus. I hadn't even seen him from distance – the primarchs had generally led their own detachments, albeit with close coordination between Legion commands. I suddenly had the prospect of witnessing the Imperium's two paramount generals in combat at the same time.

‘I must see that,’ I said.

Bel Sepatus looked at me wearily. ‘It will be difficult to get close. If you were killed, that would be an irritation.’

‘For me too.’ I tried to give him a smile. ‘I need to see it. Just a single transport – it can remain at range.’

I’d got used to the experience of battle, at least partly. Given the alternative – hanging around in the bowels of a battleship in the company of my own obsessions and frailties, sleep-deprived and stubbornly nauseous – the rush of adrenaline became something I almost cherished. I didn’t plan on making it a habit, given the likelihood of me ending up smeared across the dust on some law-forsaken world or other, but I knew I had to be there.

So it was organised. I made planetfall again, heading down in a tiny lander with just three escorts. I stumbled out of the craft into one of the big staging areas. The skies above us were churning white, blowing a gale that made the thick vegetation around the perimeter sway and billow. Five square kilometres had been burned and cleared, leaving a huge expanse of exposed red dust now covered in rows and rows of tanks, armoured transports and gunships. Flood-lumens had been erected all across the site, etching everything in stark relief. It was noisy, dirty, crowded, exhilarating – thousands of serfs were jogging or marching, hundreds of engines were already gunning, Astartes were arming up and striking battle-oaths before heading for Thunderhawks and Stormbird carriers. The dust was everywhere, kicked out by the thruster blasts and swirling up into the storm eddies above us.

‘Stay close!’ shouted my escort, a Legion serf named Enario, over the din.

We were already in our full armour – even hangers-on like me got kitted out in it for this warzone – and jogged awkwardly over to our designated station. We headed for a Thunderhawk carrier, one of dozens already thrumming with fumes and vibrations. Interleaved with the huge transporters were lines of ground vehicles, including Land Raiders and other main battle tanks. Enario pushed me in the direction of a Legion Rhino, and we piled into it – ten of us, the remainder being armoured Legion serfs. They were probably all designated as my minders, and none of them looked me in the eye as we strapped in. I didn’t mind that – I was fully used to being regarded as an annoyance.

The hatches clunked shut, the engine-note revved into drive. We rumbled up to the pickup site, and overhead I heard the much larger roar of the carrier gunship hovering down and making ready for the coupling. I didn't get a good view of it – my vision was restricted to a very narrow portal cut into the Rhino's armour – but I heard plenty. We shuddered to a halt, and a second later enormous clamps clanged tight across the exterior of the transport, making the entire structure resound.

Then we were climbing, hoisted high into the storm. I saw similar airlifts taking place from all sections of the compound – gunship after gunship, most hauling Land Raiders or pairs of Rhinos, all piling on the power to drag themselves up into the electric atmosphere. The lurch was violent, an extremely rapid ascent, and then the direction changed as the mainline thrusters boomed into life. I checked my helm's tactical read-out, and saw the true scale of the airlift: dozens of gunships in the first wave, with more already keying up to follow us in. This was, just as Bel Sepatus had said, a serious undertaking.

It didn't take long to reach our destination – a Thunderhawk moves tremendously fast once it's fully under way. The gunships all stayed high on the attack run, knowing the danger of being close to those dense carpets of cover, before entering the drop zone and triangulating for the plummet. The interior of the Rhino went dark, lit only by dull combat-lumens running along the floor. For the first time, amid all the shaking and roaring, I noticed the patterns running across the metal panels next to me – very fine scrollwork, etched out in gold across the crimson base. It was everywhere, this scrawling, this obsessive decoration. Who would ever see this stuff, save for troops being hurled into their next engagement? Who would even care that it was done?

Someone had. Someone had taken time over it. I wondered if I would ever understand it.

Then we were in position and the gunship's nose rose as the retros kicked in. We dropped hard, coming down almost horizontally, and I heard the alarms go off above me as the docking clamps prepared to release. I didn't think they'd do it while we were still airborne, still moving. I assumed we'd set down before they let us go.

I was wrong. The serfs around me all braced for impact, and then the clamps released. My stomach heaved as we fell out of the sky, making me panic – I had no idea how high we still were – before we crashed to the

ground with the Rhino's tracks already whirring. I was jolted hard, my head flung around painfully, before I realised how fast we were already going.

I twisted around to the narrow viewport. I saw gunships falling out of the sky in sequence, their drops arrested with sudden flares of smoky flame, before their cargo thunked to earth and they ascended again. The tanks started firing immediately, igniting the heavy cover ahead of them as they ploughed into it. We were already surrounded on all sides by fast-moving transports, tearing up the fronds as they churned hard up the steep slope.

Our Rhino's gunner started firing its bolter. The wind howled around us as the eerie xenos landscape kindled and burned. I heard heavier weapons fire from the Land Raiders, saw the blinding flash of ranked lascannons. As more tanks were dropped into place, the barrage became absolutely furious, a withering rain of projectiles and energy beams that wholesale demolished the terrain ahead of us.

I thought nothing could survive that. I thought we'd burn straight to the ridge summit without impediment, such was the volume of fire. So when the first big impact came, it made me jump out of my skin. The Rhino chassis rocked so steeply I thought we'd be tumbled onto our roof.

'What was that?' I blurted.

'Xenos,' replied Enario, grimly. 'Trying to knock us over.'

What did a Rhino weigh? Twenty, thirty tonnes? We had momentum, too, and powerful engines driving us onward, but something had hit us so hard that we'd nearly been upended. I gripped my restraints harder, and tried not to think about it.

By then it was perfectly clear that the run up the slope was not going to be as easy as I'd hoped. The megarachnids swarmed out of everywhere to repulse us, bursting from their burning grass-forests and flinging themselves straight at the onrushing tanks. I only caught snatched glimpses of it all, whirling and motion-blurred, but it was enough to gauge some of the elements. These were massive creatures, scarcely smaller than the vehicles they attacked, entirely armoured in those grey mottled shells and with whirring claws that flickered through the smoke before biting. I saw two xenos creatures slam into the flank of a Land Raider just metres away, rocking it off its tracks before carving into its armour. I saw other variants flying in low, their gossamer wings vibrating through the smog in crazy interference patterns. Some were hit square-on with the rain of bolt shells,

blowing them into flying slivers of armour and chitin, but others got through, latching on to the tank columns and gnawing at the outer plates.

The charge picked up pace, pushing towards the summit even as more of the xenos skittered out of the shadows or swooped down from the storm's skirts. Additional gunships hovered overhead, dropping more Land Raiders into the inferno, then unloading long missile streaks before withdrawing to safety. The press of xenos became tighter as more and more of them entered the fray, smashing bodily into vehicles before wrapping long segmented limbs around them. That tactic saw dozens of them mown down under churning tracks, but if they penetrated a fuel tank or got into the reactors then the results were incendiary – colossal explosions that saw debris flung high into the air.

I gritted my teeth. I was very scared, expecting to hear the hard crack of another xenos hitting us at any moment. The serfs around me swayed calmly, weapons in hand, completely unperturbed. It was all about numbers and timing now. The tanks would push as close to the destination as they could, only disgorging their cargo if the charge looked liable to stall. Even within the Rhino's reverberating chassis I could taste the concentration of chems in the air – the accelerants from the bolters, the spent packs ejected from the lascannons. The Blood Angels were unloading furious quantities of ordnance, driving clear avenues up and through the vegetation, blowing apart the racing xenos bodies as they threw themselves wildly into contact, pushing, pushing, harder and faster.

I heard the order to disembark crackle over the comm, and realised the moment had come. Not for me, of course – they wouldn't have trusted me to do any actual fighting – but for the hundreds and hundreds of Astartes warriors poised to break out. My Rhino carried on grinding along even as the transports around me swerved and emptied, spilling Space Marines out into the inferno like chaff leaving a hopper. The volume of ranged fire then became truly cataclysmic, amplified by vox challenges as well as massed bolters. I watched Astartes tumble from the still-moving tanks, breaking into sprints immediately, firing rapidly but discriminately, swerving through the flickering stalks and bonfires, taking on the screaming megarachnids as they jerked and scuttled to engage. The killing quickly moved to close-quarters bladework – energy fields flaring, flamers exploding, shields thudding. It looked random, confused, absurdly brutal, but it wasn't, not at all – even my untrained eye could see how carefully the squads backed one

another up, seizing ground, cutting down the enemy even as other squads tracked around to outflank them.

The tanks, having unloaded their contents, stayed with the charge, adding heft to the torrent of shells. The combined arms swept on up the ridge, taking casualties but never getting bogged down, until we reached the summit and blasted onto the plateau ahead.

Only then did my Rhino swerve aside, letting the vanguard pull properly away. By then, the numbers landed were striking – I estimated ten thousand infantry deployed and several hundred active tanks. Those huge forces were absolutely necessary: the concentrations of xenos were more numerous still. I adjusted the range of my viewfinder and scanned across a wide plain boiling with arachnid bodies, grey limbs churning through the flames and smog, all swarming to get to the invaders. Greater silhouettes shuffled out of the gloom, still at distance but closing fast – enormous constructions with bulbous torsos and spiked limbs, screaming in unison with the legions of lesser creatures at their feet. The weather systems above seemed to be acting in sympathy with them somehow, cracking and blazing as the xenos horde roused itself into feral apoplexy.

It was the first truly extensive pitched battle I'd ever witnessed. My last too, maybe. Open ground extended for kilometres ahead of us, almost featureless save for the now-flaming forests of grass. It was violence everywhere, horizon to horizon, filling up the viewports and making the tactical read-outs fizz from overload.

I saw him arrive, though. You couldn't have missed that. He hadn't soared down from the air in splendour, even though he could have chosen to do that – he'd advanced on foot alongside his troops, heading up the slope together with his Terminator-armoured Keruvim. It all looked grand and supremely archaic to me, like an ancient warlord of forgotten Terra striding out with his faithful retainers. As the fighting reached its apogee, I noted again the Blood Angels' preference for up-close fighting. They could have opted, I guessed, to hang back and let their powerful cannons and boltguns do the hard work, but they never did. Wherever it was possible to come in tight and shut down the space to move, that's what they went for. You could argue that this was the best strategy for dealing with an alien enemy that was incredibly fast over mid-range distances and seemed able to evade even well-aimed fire, but I felt there was more to it than that. They liked it better, face to face. They lived for it. The kills meant more if they came with a mix

of blood and alien gore swilled across the blade-edge and the gauntlet-knuckle. These were not conscript soldiers, herded to the front and pressured into doing their bit. These were artisans of violence who lived for nothing else. I'd always found the very notion disconcerting – we were building the very brightest future for all humanity, but *first* we needed to mutilate and gene-arrange a few hundred thousand of us so that the battles would be over quicker.

Still, I couldn't take my eyes off them. They were in a kind of ecstasy, it felt like. They were loving their work. They were hacking, punching, gouging, slashing, going toe to toe with horrors I could barely stand to look at, and they were… themselves. No reserved hauteur, no diligent attention to some intricate piece of decoration, just the basics. The raw stuff. What they had been made for.

To purify and to transform – that has been our gift.

Sanguinius himself had said it, was proud of it, clearly believed it. But I felt then that *this* was the reality of them, and all that other stuff, all the fine objects and the aesthetic labour, was just distraction. Not even a mask, in that case. Not even a mirror. A sideshow. A misdirection.

By then, my Rhino had come to a full halt and I got my clear view of Sanguinius. He was where you'd have expected, right in the centre, a bright point of light amid the whirling fire and ash. He was taking on one of the greater clades, a towering xenos warrior with a spined back and stabbing limbs the width of a man's torso. Just as at Ylech, the primarch's bodyguard weren't getting in the way – they had their own battles against the slavering, snickering swarms around them – and so the duel between the masters of the twin hordes was exposed, an iron core around which the rest of the slaughter revolved.

Trying to catch how he did it – how he fought, how he killed – that was hard. Part of it was the speed, the manic velocity of every single movement, a fractured display in the flickering light that seemed more an act of sorcery than physics. Just as before, though, I glimpsed the impossibility in his movements. We are mortal, we make mistakes. We aim, we miss; we strive, we fail. He never missed. He never failed. And it turns out the human brain doesn't process that very well. We start to try to recategorise it as something else – a machine at work, the operation of a chemical reaction, the effects of gravity. I could barely see any kinship with him at all, not just because he was *better,* but because he was *other.*

The creature he fought was, by any standards, a formidable opponent. Taller, broader, with four striking limbs, as fast as the rest of its kind, as aggressive and free from observable fear. And yet, by the end, I could almost feel sorry for it. Sanguinius was a whirl of gold and red, spiralling into its embrace only to sever a tendon, shatter an armour-piece, kick out a supporting limb. The primarch brandished his long spear as if it were an extension of himself, the glittering head swinging like a star against the darkness. He carved into the xenos, dissecting it even as it howled and shook at him. I could sense the dismay within that alien shell, the gradual realisation that it wasn't going to win this one, that this abject fate awaited every single one of its fellow creatures. Maybe it wasn't capable of such imagination. Maybe I was just projecting what I'd feel, if I were somehow transplanted into that hideous body. But I wouldn't have blamed it if it had started weeping just then. I was close to tears myself, just from witnessing what a primarch could do when the fetters were off. Just as before, I got the clear impression, picked out through the web of thrown blood and gore, that Sanguinius was a fraction out of step with everything else, that he'd pulled raw visions from the future and wound them around himself.

What had we made here? What had we let loose? He was on our side and I should have felt happy about that, but you couldn't be, not watching what he did when he was given licence. None of his gene-children would have objected, of course – they were all busy doing the same thing. As far as I knew, I was the only non-Legion member observing this at all, the only impartial witness to the wholesale slaughter. Everyone else was getting stuck in, a part of the process, a cog in the machine.

I looked up. I did it mainly to avert my eyes from the scale of the butchery, just for a moment. I was staring through my helm's magnocular setting by then, the better to scan and pan across the full extent of the battle. It was only as the field of view rose, sweeping over the heads of the struggling combatants, that I saw that I was not quite the only spectator. The spine of the ridge carried on rising towards the north-west, overhanging the wide plateau slightly as it curved its way through the endless burning jungles.

I zoomed in to the limit of my system's capability, but still it was hard to get a clear fix. The entire landscape was on fire, plunging the land into smut-filled darkness and blotting out the milk-white storms above. At distance, all I got was a fuzzy mess as the magnocular's machine-spirits

attempted to clarify the image. All the same, I picked out something. And I knew what it was – at least, I thought I did.

A single figure, set back a long way from the worst of the fighting, flanked by a supporting squad of four. Just like before. I couldn't make out any of the insignias, but I could recognise Astartes armour well enough, and had a good feeling that, whatever else was inscribed over those dark red shoulder guards, an eye within a flame would be part of the picture. He was watching, just like me. No movement, no attempt to assist his battle-brothers, just the same intent observation I'd seen in the gunship on Ylech.

They are charged with watching over their brothers.

What for, though? What could they even see, in that maelstrom of heaving bodies? If any 'lapses of discipline' had taken place, I couldn't detect them. No one could have done.

I turned to Enario. 'Can you get me up there?' I asked.

He looked at me as if I'd gone insane. 'Completely impossible,' he said, dismissively.

He was right. I'd known it as soon as the request had been made. I still might have pressed it, though, tried to find some way to get just a little closer, if the skies hadn't cracked apart and blazed with a new fury. The clouds ripped open, severed by the hard snarls of teleport beams rupturing reality. Those were followed by the thunder of fresh airdrops, with gunships coming in far closer than before to deposit their deadly cargo.

It was expertly coordinated. The first bruising assault to break the defence lines of the enemy and tie them up in intense fighting so that their uncanny ability to predict incoming assaults would be dented, then the second wave, brought in right on top of the battlefield. The newcomers were clad in pale bone armour with flamboyant topknots and crests on their helms. Their gunships hovered over the plateau, firing constantly while their occupants leapt from open doors. As if they had been doing it for decades, the two forces, crimson and white, hit the already reeling enemy.

I heard the serfs around me start to speak urgently into their comm-beads. It was all in Legion battle-cant, of course, so I didn't understand much of it. One phrase stuck out, though, since it had been mentioned many times in mission briefings. Even these hardened warriors, used to all kinds of extreme experiences, were excited about what was happening.

I was too. It was the reason I'd come, after all. To witness this. To witness this one individual, the only member of that extraordinary

brotherhood to eclipse the Angel in prestige.

And so I saw him for the first time, dropping like a falling star from his transport, sword in hand, his famed Justaerin coming with him.

‘Horus,’ I breathed, watching him crash into immediate action and fight his way towards his brother. ‘The Warmaster.’

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ELEVEN

How to compare the two of them? Difficult. Both were, to all practical purposes, so far above the run of things that they virtually transcended description. I spent a good time studying them once the fighting was over and we were back up at the fleet, and never got a perfect handle on it. You could tell they were brothers, despite the physical contrasts. They spoke to one another like brothers, sharing looks, sharing observations, seeing the world through two pairs of eyes that betrayed a certain uniformity of outlook. They were two members of a very exclusive club, a tiny fraternity that existed right at the top of the Imperial hierarchy and brooked no rivals.

I'd often wondered what that did to their psyches. Even the most powerful of our mortal generals knew that, deep down, they were made of the same physical stuff as the troops they commanded and had come from the same kinds of places as those they ordered into war. Sometimes, for all the pathos of distance, that essential species-similarity would assert itself, and you'd realise the figureheads you were so intimidated by were flesh and blood just like you, that they sweated when they were scared, that they had doubts and fears from childhood just as you did. I didn't think that applied to the primarchs. They were even further removed from the run of humanity than the Space Marines. They were bespoke. They were on another plane.

They were – and I mean this in no pejorative sense, just as non-judgemental description – freaks.

So I guessed that they needed one another more than they needed any of us. Sundered by constant warfare and the unimaginable distances of the far-flung expeditionary fleets, they no doubt spent more time in their own heads than was healthy, surrounded only by lesser beings bringing queries and complaints and problems. Whenever that changed, whenever they had an opportunity to speak to one of their own kind, I imagined they leapt at the chance. I imagined they must have been far closer than natural siblings, bound together by bonds tighter than any imposed by law or custom.

You can laugh, now. I look back on it myself, knowing what took place just months later, and wince. But then, *then*, it was all different. And there was no feigning how close the two of them were in that moment. Nothing at all to give the future away. They were relieved to be in one another's company when the moment came – they could share a smile, and know what it meant, and know that no other soul in the entire fleet would understand it just as they did. As I observed them, walking easily next to one another down the corridors of the *Vengeful Spirit*, their armour still splattered with the residue of xenos blood, I had the distinct sense that some of what passed between them was transmitted sub-verbally, as I was told the tech-priests communicated, though without all the metallic add-ons. Something more like psychic sympathy. Or maybe just familiarity.

I knew they had spent many years together before Sanguinius was finally united with his own Legion, with Horus the instructor and Sanguinius the pupil. The bond between both them and their respective gene-children remained tight, something that had been evident during the fighting I'd witnessed down on the surface. The combat styles were different, but only by degree – I thought the Luna Wolves were a little rougher, a little more willing to do whatever it took to kill their target rather than orchestrate an optimal close-combat scenario – but I wouldn't have wanted to bet on which approach was more effective. These were two of the finest Legions in the entire Imperium, right up there in terms of their victory record and propaganda value. Sanguinius might have been the image pinned over manufactoria assembly lines, but more lines of prose had been written about Horus than any other living person. After Ullanor, his reputation had only been cemented further. The Emperor was beloved by all, to be sure, but He

was a long way away and unknowable, whereas Horus was on the vid-reels, the hololith projectors, and he took the fight to the enemy in the void.

I hadn't seen anything of him at the start of our deployment on this world. We had all been closeted away on the *Red Tear* for the most part, except for my infrequent excursions to the surface to observe the Angels in action. It was only after that huge pitched battle on the ridge – later immortalised in the Imperial Archives as Encounter 140-42-3V – that I was able to accompany the IX Legion delegation over to the *Vengeful Spirit*. It had been a decisive victory, one that opened up the possibility of pushing deep into the xenos nest-zones. Several companies of Blood Angels transferred across, along with a few hundred support staff. I was one of those, as was Widera. The mood was celebratory, and no doubt they wanted better records for posterity than the Archives were likely to generate.

As for myself, I was feeling better than I had for weeks. I'd begun to think that getting out of the stale air of the voidships was the key to combatting my lethargy, but for some reason the *Vengeful Spirit* didn't have a negative effect on me. I was still buzzing from the experience of witnessing such intense combat up close – maybe that was it.

'Enjoyed yourself down there, did you?' asked Widera as we marched along behind the Legion's warriors.

She was as dismissive as ever, but I sensed a little jealousy in her tone. Widera could be a waspish creature, increasingly fragile, and I guessed she'd been surprised at my willingness to risk myself for the cause.

'It was interesting,' I said. 'You should have been there yourself.'

'I had work to do. Talking of that, how's the book coming on?'

I had more material now than I knew what to do with, and despite everything I'd continued to make progress towards a portrait of the primarch. I wondered if she resented that, and wanted me to fail again, or whether her desire to create something special was actually genuine.

'It'll be a masterpiece,' I said.

She rolled her eyes. 'Right.'

The procession reached its destination – a large audience chamber set deep inside the upper deck levels. I'd forgotten just how plain and unadorned a standard Imperial ship was, having spent so long on IX Legion variants. The *Vengeful Spirit* wasn't utilitarian, exactly, as there were plenty of icons and objects from their Cthonian domains, but the decoration wasn't quite so ubiquitous. I kept expecting to see frescoes and sculptures, and

instead got bulkheads and bare-metal access hatches. I quite liked the change. The *Vengeful Spirit* felt like a well-ordered ship, a healthy one.

The chamber filled up. Most of the participants were Astartes, and I'd started to become something close to comfortable around them. Baseline humans were there in numbers too – many from Cthonia, Terra, or a dozen other worlds. We were a patchwork of different uniforms, different roles. No representatives of the third Legion present in theatre – the Emperor's Children – had attended. I didn't know why, exactly, but it was no great surprise. No one liked them.

Most of the conversation that followed was routine stuff – wrap-ups of the various encounters, shared intelligence, the genesis of plans for more. I didn't follow all of it, and didn't attempt to. I was more interested in the two of them, how they interacted. I wondered if Horus' new rank would dictate the way they spoke to one another, whether Sanguinius would defer to him. I didn't see much sign of it. They were like equals – Horus listened to him, and Sanguinius listened to his brother. If anything, Horus paid more attention. I began to see the pair of them like a warlord and his counsellor: the master of armies and his wise sage. Horus was the older of the two, at least if you dated their ages by when they were found, but Sanguinius felt older just then, as if he'd been doing it all for longer.

'I don't think I've properly thanked you yet,' Sanguinius said, once the strategic situation had been fully appraised. 'For coming. For being the first strike of vengeance.'

Horus bowed. 'We were honour-bound to respond.'

'As were Fulgrim's sons. The captain, Tarvitz – he gave us great kindness when we first arrived.'

'Yes, they're not all complete arseholes.'

Sanguinius smiled. 'We could be here for months. There's millions of those things still alive.'

'If that's how long it takes.'

'But you have other things you need to be doing.'

Horus shrugged. 'What's more important? It gladdens my heart to do this together – it reminds me of the early years.'

Sanguinius looked at him for a moment. 'How was your last compliance?'

'Sixty-Three-Nineteen. Same result as always.'

'But something changed there.'

Horus looked up. ‘Really?’

‘Maybe just a Warmaster’s reserve.’ Sanguinius shrugged. ‘But you seem different.’

Horus hesitated. I thought he might divulge something then – it looked as if he half wanted to. ‘Not really. Never good to take on your own kind, is it? You’d think they’d learn to accept the inevitable.’

‘None of us would, if another empire suddenly announced itself and told us to accept a new master.’

‘Konrad might.’

‘Ah, well. He might do anything.’

‘Except crack a smile. The gloomy bastard.’

Some of Horus’ troops chuckled at that. I saw then what was truly different about the two primarchs. Horus was human, in the broadest sense. His movements were natural, his good humour was evident. He looked like the kind you might take for a drink, share stories of old conquests or youthful exploits. It was foolish – someone like him would never end up with someone like me in a social setting – but you could *imagine* it. Sanguinius, though, never lost that air of reserve. He was polite, he was soft-spoken, he was intelligent, but he was somehow above it all, gazing out at the world from an interior state of unknowable diffidence.

So that was one reason why Horus had been made Warmaster – that mystical quality of *being liked*. Hard to overstate how important that was for buying loyalty even in the hard-nosed atmosphere of the Imperial Army. A trooper would fight well enough for any general who didn’t abuse them, but one like this, one who could make you feel you were valued and important and had his consideration, even for a second, that was priceless. Sanguinius naturally inspired absolute admiration in anyone who met him, but it was a rarefied kind of emotion. Almost like religious devotion. You wanted to know that he existed, somewhere out there, doing what needed to be done, but you didn’t necessarily want to meet him or find yourself talking to him. You’d be tongue-tied, overwhelmed, unsure where to look.

And I think the primarch of the Blood Angels was aware of this. And I think that then, more than ever, this was because he was working hard, all the time, to maintain the persona that we expected him to have, whereas Horus was simply himself, naturally impressive, handsome without being beautiful, energetic without being manic. He had no extra work to do to achieve it, no immersion into the creative arts in order to sublimate his

tortured heritage, just the easy, slightly rakish charm of a natural leader, one who swam in political waters as easily as he dominated the battlefield.

So I understood then why the Emperor had done what He'd done, though it didn't make my doubts about my subject go away. Because another way of saying that Sanguinius was constantly maintaining an image was that he was pretending. And another way of saying that he was pretending was that he was lying.

I didn't believe that. I still don't. You have to understand this – I have never, ever met anyone with as much evident integrity as Sanguinius. No one with as much bravery, nor as much expertise.

So why couldn't he be himself? That was what nagged at me. Why couldn't he be like Horus?

We were sent out soon after that. The two brothers wished to confer in private, with only their trusted counsellors present. Widera and I shuffled out of the chamber with the rest. I tried to catch up with her in the corridor, to ask her when she was due back on the *Red Tear*, but I was interrupted by another woman, one who was much younger, with very dark skin and two discreet scars indicating augmetic surgery at her temples. She seemed nervous, or maybe just tense.

'Ser Kautenya?' she asked.

'Avajis, please,' I said, smiling at her.

'Mersadie Oliton,' she said, reaching out a hand. 'Documentarist. I read your book.'

As ever, that twinge of embarrassment and pleasure. 'Look, it wasn't–'

'I enjoyed it. It informed some of my approaches to this business. Going this way?'

I didn't know. I wasn't sure when I'd be summoned, or what I'd be required to do next. I had notes to write up, recollections to set down, but there was no immediate urgency. 'I guess so.'

We walked down the corridor together. This Oliton had an appealing earnestness about her.

'They told me you'd been down to the surface. To Murder.'

'I had to press for that.'

'None of us could get clearance,' she told me. 'Even Sindermann – he's the most senior. I was wondering… I could use some data, if you have it.'

'Sure,' I said, as we reached the first bulkhead of many. 'What kind of thing?'

‘Vid-feeds, audex-lines. Anything I can use to put a documentary together. I’ve been learning about how the Legion wages war, but without actually getting close, you can’t get it *right*, you know?’

‘Agreed.’ Now I was wondering why the Blood Angels had let me go at all, when the Luna Wolves were clearly more protective of their remembrancers. ‘I’ll need to get back to the ship, extract the datacores, but you’re welcome to what I’ve got.’

She looked up at me, a gesture that made her look strangely fragile – she must have been a lot younger than me. ‘What was it like, if you don’t mind me asking?’

I chuckled. ‘Overwhelming. Very impressive. Far too dangerous – I won’t be doing it again. But worth it, to get a sense of just how insane these people are.’

Oliton gave me a rueful smile. ‘It still takes me aback, sometimes. Even after I’ve spoken to a dozen of them. You never quite get used to it, no matter how hard they try to put you at your ease.’

Very few of the Blood Angels had ever done that. I remembered Aelion then, though, and resolved to find him again when I was back on the *Red Tear*, assuming he wasn’t still tied up in fighting.

‘They’re weapons,’ I said. ‘Even the most senior of them. The mistake is to treat them like people. The more I look into it, the more I think that’s the way to approach this.’

I surprised myself by saying that. I’d not had any such idea before that moment, but as soon as I said it, probably trying to impress this younger and more attractive colleague, I realised that it was probably true.

‘A cynical view,’ she said, though it sounded like she didn’t entirely disagree. ‘Which makes me wonder what they make of us.’

‘Fragile, easily breakable, annoyances,’ I guessed.

She laughed. ‘Probably.’ We reached a closed doorway, and she put a hand out to activate the release. ‘I appreciate the help, though. Anything I can do to pay you back?’

‘No, it’d be my genuine pleasure,’ I said, preparing to step through into the chamber beyond. Then I halted. ‘Except, though… These Legions fought together for a long time, didn’t they? Years and years. Who’s the oldest member of the Luna Wolves who might be prepared to speak to me?’

Oliton smiled to herself, as if I’d opened myself up to some long-running joke, though the sense of it escaped me.

‘How much tolerance do you have?’ she asked. ‘For stories, I mean?’

I blinked. Was that something to worry about? ‘Plenty,’ I said, warily.

‘Then there’s only one name that springs to mind,’ she said, amused. ‘And, trust me, he’d be *delighted* to talk.’

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TWELVE

Iacton Qruze. I'll never forget the name. Not just because it was a bizarre one, most unlike the other Cthonian names that dominated the Legion, but because of the long hours I spent in his company.

He could talk. Throne of Terra, he could *talk.* Perhaps it was his greatest weapon. Perhaps, if his blade and his bolter ever failed, he'd be able to bore his enemies to death.

But that's unfair. He wasn't boring. On the contrary, much of what he told me was riveting, candid in a way that no other Space Marine had ever been, remembrancer gold. It was just that there was so much of it, and it all spilled out in one go, as he was clearly very pleased to have someone listening.

As I sat there, the recorders clicking and my face aching from having to nod and smile at key junctures, I couldn't help thinking about that. Some human weaknesses remained then, in these ultimate warriors. They might not know fear, but they could be resentful of being sidelined, or insecure about a rapidly changing galaxy that seemed to have less and less of a place for them. They could believe themselves to be valued counsellors while being secretly perturbed about the sidelong glances or raised eyebrows that they caught sight of from time to time. They could wonder at, and become

frustrated about, the fact they were not a member of the Mournival council when many younger warriors had been invited.

Such were the internal politics of the XVI Legion, which were hardly things I could comment on. I wasn't with him to talk about that, despite the fact he was so keen to illuminate me, but to discover more about the IX Legion, especially from the period before they became icons of veneration for the Imperium.

'I remember him arriving,' Qruze told me as we sat together in his private cell. It was a modest room with bare walls and a rough rockcrete floor. 'Fifty-nine years ago, and it's like it was yesterday. We'd seen other primarchs before. We'd served with them. None of them provoked the interest he did. We knew so little about his Legion, see? They were kept away, kept out of sight. I thought he'd be a mutant. And he was, I suppose, but not like I'd feared. Maybe the radiation spared him, or maybe it didn't. The results looked good, either way.'

'How much did you see of him?'

'Not much, to start with. The Warmaster – not that he was called that then, mind – took him in tow. They talked together a lot, most of it private. The first few times I witnessed him, I thought he looked the part. Quiet, mind. Not like that bruiser Russ, who I also met. I liked Russ. He's underrated, if you ask me, especially by those who…'

There was plenty of this. Digressions, unasked-for opinions. I tried to filter the irrelevant stuff out.

'It was the eyes,' Qruze said, musingly, rubbing at his goatee. 'You looked at them, and what looked back at you was older than it should have been. You know what I mean? Like he's already seen what you're looking at right now. Like he's been there before. I thought that more than once. In combat, too – he fought like he knew where his enemy was going to strike. I mentioned that to Tarik a long way back, and he agreed. It was eerie, at first, but we got used to it after a while. I'm not saying he *really* knew, mind. Like he was some kind of Librarian. More that he gave you that impression. Probably just because he was so good. There aren't many living souls in the galaxy who I'd give a chance to against my own primarch, but he's one of them. It's frightening, seeing how expertly he kills.'

It was. It really was.

'And he was old before his time, too,' Qruze went on. 'I don't know how ageing works with them, to be honest. I don't know if the order they were

found tells you anything about their biological age – I guess it probably does – but even if he *was* younger than Lupercal, he never really acted like it. Though he looks youthful enough, he's curiously ageless, don't you think? Like he's been around forever. And it didn't take long for people to ask him for guidance, for counsel. Even the Warmaster. At times, before an action, I'd look at the two of them and see the Angel leaning over to say something to him privately, like an old sage cautioning against some rash move on the part of his warlord.'

I'd thought almost the exact same thing.

'He advised on your change of name, didn't he?' I asked.

'So they tell me. Sons of Horus.' Qruze snorted. 'We shouldn't be altering the old names. There's been too much change anyway, and no good will come of it.'

'Things move on.'

Qruze looked irritated. 'Do they? Do they really?' He shook his head. 'The badges and the insignia change. The stuff underneath – not so much. Take the Ninth. The Revenant Legion, they were. They were feared and they were hated. You mentioned their name, and watched expressions darken. I could tell you stories. Oh, I could tell you things.'

'Please do.'

He leaned forward, lowered his voice. Which was odd, because no one else was remotely in earshot. 'The constant rumour was that their omophagea was faulty. You know, the organ that gives us the ability to ingest memories. We all have it. We devour the slain to discover their secrets. You knew this, I take it? Some of your kind are remarkably ignorant.'

I did know it. I'd never found it palatable, and often wondered if it were really true – I couldn't imagine how the mechanism could possibly work, on a scientific basis at least. I nodded, trying to guess where this was all going.

'It's a rare ability, rarely used,' said Qruze. 'Some Legions are keener on it than others. Some Legions are *very* keen on it indeed. They positively relish the chance to sink their teeth into the flesh of the slain, to get their mouths bloody while it's still hot. Gives them a tactical advantage, they say. No doubt true. But maybe there's more. Maybe they have a hunger that they won't admit to. Maybe it's about appetite as much as necessity.'

I suddenly remembered the corpse on Ylech, the one drained grey, and had an uncomfortable feeling. ‘They’re professional soldiers.’

‘They are now.’ Qruze chuckled darkly. ‘We fought with them for a long time. Ten years, on and off, our companies placed under parallel command. By the end of that, they were like you see them now. Polished blades, gilt-edged armour, all haughty nobility. At the start, it wasn’t like that. He hadn’t had a chance to work his spell on them, and they were a bunch of wretches, believe me. I almost refused to work with them. Some of the others felt the same. They’d brought some foul habits with them, and for all they looked the part, the sickness ran deep. They hated everything – they hated the enemy, they hated us, they hated themselves. It made them deadly, in a way, but impossible to fight alongside.’

I didn’t like to hear any of this. ‘But he changed it all, didn’t he?’

‘From the very start,’ said Qruze, nodding. ‘He was the only one to treat them with any respect, and they responded to that. I think they were ready for the change. They knew it needed to come, and he was the one to bring it. They cleaned themselves up. The reports of atrocities started to fall away. I don’t mean to suggest that they stopped doing… those things, just that they got more careful about it. Or they weaned themselves off it. A bit.’

This was more than I had bargained for. ‘But the important thing,’ I pressed, ‘was that the primarch cured them. Whatever excesses they were subject to, they’re over it now.’

Qruze gave me a cryptic smile. ‘You’re sure about that?’ he said. ‘You’re sure that such a deep-sunk tendency can be rooted out, so that it never emerges again?’ He shook his head. ‘You’re *human*, remembrancer. You’re flesh and blood with minimal tampering. We’re not. We’re creations, built for a purpose. Everything in us is dominated by the gene-seed. It makes us who we are, and governs our tempers and our inclinations and our loyalties. And what is the origin of the gene-seed? The primarch. We’re just extensions of them. Reflections of that original glory.’

I thought he was goading me then. I thought he wanted me to get angry. ‘It’s not that simple,’ I said confidently.

‘Oh, not that simple. I see. I didn’t realise I was talking to an expert.’ He sat back, stretching out two massive arms, grinning at me. ‘Of course, these things are complex. But you asked me the questions, you wanted to burrow into the past, and so don’t complain when someone gives you the answers. You’ve heard tales of the Revenant Legion, and you want to believe that

Sanguinius came along and made them pure. That's what everyone wants to believe. And it's true. Of course it is. He *did* turn them around, and now they're loved rather than feared, and everyone suddenly wants to fight with them.'

Then his long, mournful face twisted into an expression that was hard to read.

'But don't believe that their old form had nothing to do with him,' he said. 'The seed was always there. What they are now, he once was. And what they were then, he is now.'

It was then that I began to sicken again.

Maybe the euphoria of my dangerous trip to the surface had worn off. Or maybe going back to the *Red Tear* brought it all on again. Whatever the reason, I began to feel the pain, the aches and the spasms. I travelled between the giant flagships on a lighter with Widera, and she noticed the change in me at once.

'You look bad,' she said, helpfully.

I wondered if she'd become jealous. I guessed that she'd not expected me to work so hard, to get such access in such a short time. I'd spoken to the primarch himself, to members of his trusted circle, to veteran warriors of the Warmaster's own Legion. To all appearances, I was doing better than she could have imagined.

In truth, I barely knew what I was doing. I had a whole collection of material now, some of it suggestive, much of it banal, some hard to interpret. The more I discovered, the less I felt I understood. I admired this Legion so much. I'd seen – twice now – how powerful they were, how steeped in the finest acts of creation and destruction. They had risen from the very basest depths to become a brotherhood admired and trusted even by the greatest of the primarchs. And yet the doubt never left me. The words unsaid, the oppressive air of secrecy. Even their name seemed to promise a threat: Blood Angels.

I swallowed down my nausea, and tried to remember exactly when I'd had more than an hour or so of sleep.

'Working too hard,' I said. 'How about you?'

She reached for her projector again, and showed me what she'd been working on. It was another battlefield depiction, this time showing the primarch and Warmaster jointly taking on megarachnids. I liked this one better – she had an uncanny talent for conveying the alien monsters just as

they had been. Both Sanguinius and Horus were appropriately heroic, and on this occasion I couldn't find any fault with the rendering. That was just how it had been, the two of them fighting back to back amid the seething hordes, holding back the tides of xenos and presiding over their slaughter. Sanguinius' wings were extended, rising high into the fiery night, though in reality he'd kept them furled. Otherwise, though, it was excellent, and brought back everything I'd felt at the time – the terror, the exhilaration, the pride.

'Very good,' I said, without any intended irony. 'That'll inspire them on the production lines.'

Widera snapped the projection off. 'I'm worried about you,' she said, looking carefully at me. 'You took all the anti-rad treatments on Baal, didn't you?'

'All of it. I don't think this is–'

'Something might have got to you. You should see a member of the Legion staff.'

By then I was increasingly sure that this wasn't the source of my malaise, but I merely nodded so that she wouldn't press it.

We neared the *Red Tear*. The slow docking cycle gave me plenty of time to admire its vertiginous flanks as the flagship loomed closer – the gunwales glistening with gold leaf, the long crimson panels of armour decorated with cherubs and winged tears. My first glimpse of it had overwhelmed me; this one only underlined my nausea. I'd become, to be honest, fed up with all the finery. It no longer impressed me, it oppressed me. Like an overscented garden, with the roses past their best and now beginning to moulder, the riot of colour felt suffocating, and as the great docking bay doors slid out of the gloom, I could barely summon the energy to watch.

'You still enjoy your work,' I said to Widera, more to take my mind off those thoughts than out of genuine interest.

'I love it,' she said, fervently. 'No honour could be greater. I can't fight, but I can do this.'

'And you remain as committed to them as you ever were.'

She smiled. 'Look around you – this is the pinnacle of our civilisation, the very best of it. We come out of the long years of destruction and decay, and build *this*. I've seen things in the shadows of their ships that would be

priceless anywhere else, but they stay hidden, locked away, because they only do it for themselves.'

'You might think that selfish.'

She rolled her eyes. 'I know you're trying to find every fault you can. Every little chink in their armour. No one could meet the standards you set. They're killers, they have to be, and yet you can't get past it.'

'I'm not looking for faults.'

'You're turning over every stone. I hoped this assignment might have cured you of that. Remember before? Your name was worth nothing. You were over. You have a chance to make amends now, and all I hear from you is ways to avoid the remedy.'

'It's got to be the truth.'

'Then write the truth! Write how they fight, without fear, without hesitation. Write how they conquer worlds so that the species can survive – at huge cost. Write how he takes on the horrors of the void so that you and I don't have to. He's magnificent. He's a paragon.'

'I have done. I've done all that.'

She drew closer to me, peering at me like I was some strange and frustrating specimen. 'Then what's your problem? Why, exactly, can't you just celebrate him for what he is? Is it… I don't know – mental stress? Is that the problem?'

I didn't know either. I couldn't articulate it. It was more of a sensation, a dread that grew every time I was immersed in that vast ship. The hangar entrance closed over us, replacing the darkness with a dull red glow from the guide lumens. It felt like being swallowed alive, sucked down into the maw of some colossal and ravening beast. There could be no doubt about it now – the ship itself was the source of it. Maybe any of their ships would have had the same effect. Was it a smell, a pheromone that somehow got to me? Was I allergic to something on board? Someone?

The lighter connected with its docking clamps, and the structure sent out a resounding boom. Soon the hold lumens would come on, the hatches would slide open, the Legion serfs would take us out. I just looked at Widera's face, seeing the disappointment in it, the uncomprehending irritation.

'Well, we won't be here forever,' Widera said, tiring of waiting for an answer. 'Already there's talk of moving to the Kayvas Belt, so you need to produce something to give them soon.'

She got up, and I heard the bustle of serfs coming to get us.
‘You have a great title,’ she said. ‘Write something worthy of it.’

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THIRTEEN

I decided to look for Aelion again. Of all the Legion members I had met, including Sanguinius himself, he was the only one who had made me feel truly inspired about his heritage. He had been dynamic, vigorous, with none of the angst or gloominess that Bel Sepatus seemed to carry with him. If he could knock some of these strange notions out of my head, maybe I could get on and finish the work I'd started.

As soon as I decided on it, I realised how hard it would be. Tens of thousands of Astartes had been mustered for the engagement, with multiple planetary drops and extended missions. The very idea of going back down to Murder filled me with trepidation – I no longer felt physically up to it, and in any case doubted I'd be able to persuade a military escort to go with me again. My main hope was that he had been recalled to the flagship, which was something that happened regularly – squads were rotated frequently in order to repair equipment, patch up the wounded and stock up on fresh supplies. Although there were now permanent forward bases on the planet's surface, most of those were under constant attack from xenos and so were generally used as staging posts for planned musters.

I tried to get access to the command bridge level and was rebuffed – my remembrancer's pass got me most places, but not there. I attempted to contact Bel Sepatus, but nothing came back. The Keruvim were in action

virtually the whole time, along with their primarch, and so this wasn't surprising. I drew a blank after that, and went back to the archives. After discussions with some of the menials stationed there, I went on a trawl of the lower-level strategium cells – the places where tabs were kept on the movements of troops and materiel. There seemed to be hundreds of these chambers, some clustered together, others spread between different decks. They were dark, claustrophobic places, with banks of picter lenses flickering in the shadows. Menials hunched over them, scrawling down orders received through augmetic earpieces before transmitting them to where they needed to be. The chatter from open comm-lines was continuous: damage reports, requests for airlifts, survey results, the whole panoply of a Legion at war.

Few in those places wanted to talk to me, busy as they were. I was sent elsewhere, or had doors slammed in my face, or was promised answers only for the cowled serfs to run off after other things, leaving me hanging. Eventually, I managed to corner an older menial, one of the few who I felt able to hold my ground with, and insisted on getting some help. I was an Imperial remembrancer, I told him, given warrant by the primarch himself to record and document the Legion's every action.

The menial – a sallow-faced man with a moth-eaten cowl and stubbly jaw – grudgingly agreed to run some queries for me. He limped over to a console, plugged some wires into jacks in his arm, activated a clunky-looking cogitator bank and started to make enquiries.

'Aelion, Tactical Marine,' I told him. 'Seventh Company, Ninth Squad.'

The machinery clicked and jabbered. Eventually, the menial unplugged his jacks and looked up at me. 'No data,' he said.

I looked back at him, a little startled. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean, no data. I can't tell you his location.'

'But that's your job.'

'There are tens of thousands of warriors down there. Hundreds of squads. I can't give you locations for all of them.'

I doubted that. This was a superbly organised Legion, one that prided itself on its attention to detail. 'Is the company still on active deployment? Is his squad?'

'The company was recalled for resupply two cycles ago. It is due for deployment on the next shift. I have no information on the squad dispositions.'

I looked into the man’s eyes. I could have pushed a little harder, maybe, but had a strong sense I was wasting my time. I didn’t scare him. Either he was merely being unhelpful, or he’d been given an order not to assist this enquiry.

‘Thanks,’ I said, giving him a sour smile, before leaving him to it.

This was an irritation. The longer I tramped down those long corridors, all of them bronze and gilt and smelling faintly of incense, the more my headache got worse and my innards flared. My fatigue was making my concentration fuzzier than ever – at times I even lost focus, and my surroundings briefly dissolved into a haze of gold.

I went back to my own chambers, poured myself a drink, lay on my hard cot, and tried to relax. I couldn’t. My head was buzzing and the drink tasted foul. I kept seeing Iacton Qruze’s grizzled features floating above me, and closed my eyes to get rid of them. I tried to focus on what I needed to do – clear my mind, get something finished, get rid of all the strange notions I’d picked up on this long journey through the void.

Was it the warp? They said things about warp travel, that it planted paranoia, that it made sane people mad. But why was only I affected? Everyone else seemed fine.

I heard my breathing slow down. My fingers unclenched.

I opened my eyes again and saw a stain forming on the ceiling above me. My eyes widened. The stain was pale brown, spreading steadily, deepening into dark red.

I scrambled away from the bed, only to see the spreading pattern suddenly morph into a face, like an inkblot test, a cherub’s face made of blood that kept getting bigger and clearer. And then the cherub aged, rapidly transforming into a golden mask, one with ringlets and cheekbones and an open mouth. A clawed hand reached down, stretching the fabric of the ceiling panel, followed by a wing tip that dripped blood onto the sheets below.

I started awake, panting heavily. The ceiling panel above me was just as it should have been. My drink lay on the floor beside me, toppled over where I’d dropped it.

I checked the chrono. A few hours had passed, taking me into the ship’s noctis-watch. I didn’t feel refreshed, I felt clammy and disorientated. That was the best I could hope for now, it seemed – slipping into unconsciousness until a nightmare dragged me back into waking.

I got up. I knew I wouldn’t get any more rest. I brushed my robes down, disliking the sweat patches that my fingers ran over. Amid a ship full of demigods, I was degenerating, becoming the worst version of myself.

I tried to work. I pulled out my notes, I started to scribble on my data-slates. Nothing would come. I got up from my desk again, paced the chamber. Then I remembered Aelion. I’d wanted to speak to him. For some reason, I’d got it into my head that meeting him again would make me feel better. He’d been healthy. He’d been admirable.

I could find him. If he was on the ship, I could find his chamber again. Why hadn’t I thought of that before? Why was I trying to do everything through official channels? It was a brilliant idea. I was getting my energy back.

I did the best I could to smarten myself up – brushed the worst of the dirt from my jacket, smoothed down my hair. When I looked in the mirror, I could see that my eyes were shining wetly. I had a thin layer of sweat on every exposed patch of skin. That bothered me for a moment or two, but I couldn’t hang around to investigate – I had to be off. I had to be doing, otherwise all I’d achieve would be more procrastination and more bad dreams.

A voidship during noctis-watch is a strange place. There’s no genuine division between night and day, of course, but it’s standard practice to make certain changes to reflect a nominal diurnal cycle. Much of the crew live on the ship their entire lives – if they didn’t have some time series to anchor themselves to, they’d go mad. So they dim the lumens for a few hours in the deep of the false night, they reduce some of the non-critical functions in order to generate a vague air of difference. The interior of the *Red Tear* was always a shadowy place, with all that statuary and artwork lurking in soft candlelit murk, but during noctis it became positively sepulchral.

I walked along as confidently as I could. Menials were still about, padding quietly from station to station, and I nodded at them as I passed. I hadn’t eaten for some time, and my head felt light. I had a whining sound in my ears that wouldn’t go away, though that might have been tinnitus from the constant engine thrum.

Could I remember the way? Aelion’s chamber was kilometres off, buried deep in the maze of halls and decks and access shafts. I’d have to take a mag-train some of the distance, find the right elevator clusters to gain access. I wasn’t very worried about being challenged – I’d been given more

or less free rein by the primarch, after all – but getting lost was a real possibility. I had to concentrate, but that was difficult, because the pain in my head was now acute.

I pressed on doggedly, limping through the gloom and trying to remember where the turnings were. Paintings, half-lit, passed me by, showing flashes of faces and forests and mythological beasts. The marble floors glimmered, and the night noises of a half-asleep ship – the echoing clanks from far off, the murmur of a somnolent crew – resonated in the torpid air.

I don't know how long it took me to locate it again. Maybe I was lucky, and took a direct route, or maybe I wandered for hours. I couldn't tell. But I got there in the end, and saw that the doors were open. That was strange. Whether he was on board or not, that shouldn't have been the case. I looked down the corridor in both directions – empty. A candle was guttering some way off, making the shadows dance.

'Aelion,' I called out, creeping closer to the open door.

No reply. I edged to the threshold, and peered inside. It was hard to make much out, so I let my eyes adjust. In the far corner of the main chamber, I saw the bronze bust looking right back at me. I walked towards it.

'Aelion,' I said again, though it was already clear that no one was in there. I saw no sign of any clothes, any weapons. The chamber looked like it had been half-cleared, with only the various artworks and fixed fittings remaining.

I glanced over at the inner doorway, the one Aelion had prevented me from going through before. Maybe he was on the other side of it. Maybe a clue to his whereabouts was in there.

My mouth was dry. I knew this was folly. I knew I shouldn't be there, and that only bad things would come of going further, but by then I was almost moving automatically, tracing out a path that felt as if it had been preordained for me once I'd set off from my own rooms. I reached out for the lock-release, pressed the lever.

The door slid open, and a series of soft amber lumens glowed into life. A small chamber was revealed on the other side, virtually bare of adornment. Down the centre of it stood eight stone columns, each one coming up to chest level. On the square capitals stood more bronze busts, much like the one in the main chamber. I walked down the line, inspecting them.

Each of them was of Aelion. I recognised the heavy Astartes musculature, the same set of facial features. I guessed he'd done all of them, just like the one outside. These were in a series. The first one looked similar to the one I'd already seen, though with a different expression – one of anger. I admired it. It reminded me of the primarch's face during combat.

Then they changed. The anger amplified, the lips twisted, the eyes bulged. These ones were more than battle-fury – they were some kind of frenzy. The fifth bust had beautifully rendered froth bubbles at the corner of an open mouth. The sixth had exposed fangs, pupilless eyes, a gaping jawline with cords of saliva hanging in loops. How had he done that in bronze? It was an astonishing achievement, but very disturbing. I barely recognised the species, let alone the subject.

The last one was almost impossible to look at. It was horrible. What little remained of the human facial order had been entirely rearranged, a study in berserk abandon. The fangs were fully exposed now – great stabbing incisors that I was sure I'd not noticed on any living Blood Angel. The eyes were virtually popping out of their sockets, the skin sucked in and withered. This was not a human, even in the attenuated sense that Space Marines were; this was the vision of a nightmare, one that had consumed the sculptor and chewed him into madness.

I took a step back, breathing hard. I didn't like it in here. I felt that the heads were all staring at me. Any minute now they'd come to life, screaming. I had to get out. I couldn't breathe. My headache had become a pulsing beat behind my eyes, as if something were clawing to get out.

I stumbled back the way I'd come, running down the corridor. I reached an alcove where a rather more serene statue of a Legion warrior stood, and wedged myself beside it, sinking to my haunches and shivering.

Aelion must have made them all. They were all self-portraits. Had those things really happened to him, then? Or had he imagined them? If so, why? And where was he? Why did no one talk about it? I remembered the records I'd found – ships going back to Baal, no explanations, no connection to the war effort. Had they taken him away? Had he gone mad?

I heard voices, and pressed myself back into the alcove, staying absolutely still, hardly daring to breathe.

At the far end of the corridor, a lantern appeared. I recognised Widera by its bobbing light, along with a man who looked like the menial I'd spoken

to at the cogitator station. They both went up to Aelion's chamber and peered inside.

'No one there?' I heard Widera ask.

'Empty.'

'But he was asking after this Space Marine, you tell me?'

'Insistently.'

'For what reason?'

'He didn't say.'

I saw Widera lean against the door frame, as if weary. 'He had no business doing that. He's been ill for some time. Rad-sickness, I think. I wonder if this was a mistake. Perhaps he should be placed in confinement, given a proper assessment, before we decide what to do. He has access to the primarch, after all.'

'The primarch is due to return at the next cycle.'

'Then it should be done before then. You'll see to it?'

'I can put it in train.'

Widera shook her head sadly. 'I hoped he'd rise to the occasion. This is my failure, I fear.'

Then they went back the way they'd come, and the lantern went with them, gradually swallowed up by the darkness.

It took me a long time before I dared to breathe out loud. My palms were dripping with sweat. So they wanted to lock me down, to get me out of the way. That was only because I was getting close to some truths, some strange and unsettling truths. Widera had always had it in for me. Always. Maybe she'd set me up to fail from the start. My books were too good. My brilliance overshadowed her. That was probably it.

What could I do next? I couldn't go back to my chambers, not if they were now seeking to constrain my movements. I didn't have any allies here. I was on my own. I thought about trying to make it back to the hangars, try to get a lighter over to the *Vengeful Spirit*, but quickly discounted that. I was just as vulnerable over there, even if I made it.

I had to stay hidden. I had to lie low. The primarch was coming back soon. I could go to him. We'd spoken candidly. He could intervene, nip all this nonsense in the bud. I wasn't mad. I could just see things that others couldn't. He would respect that.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed out of my hiding place, and started to limp along the corridor.

Further down, I thought. The deep decks. That was the only way.

I didn't have any particular route in mind – I simply knew that the Astartes were less likely to go down there, and so I'd stay out of sight, wait for my moment to find the primarch. I scampered along in the shadows, listening carefully for any sign of pursuit. These areas were sparsely populated, with so many warriors still on the surface, so if I was careful I could make my way down the stairwells and the elevator shafts undetected. The further I travelled, the gloomier and more deserted places became, even though the booming grind of the engines grew in volume.

I was wheezing all the time, now. It felt as if my lungs had been scraped out with a rusty blade. Everything was fuzzy – the edges of doorways, the halos of dim lumens.

I don't know how long it was before I saw another living soul. I guessed these decks were never well lit, and the walls were like pools of pitch. My boots splashed through puddles of liquid – brackish water, maybe, or leaking oil. It smelled musty and confined. I narrowed my eyes, peering ahead into the darkness. I saw pairs of eyes blinking back at me, reflected in the uncertain light of flickering sodium bulbs.

I took a step towards those eyes, and saw huddled bodies uncoil and leap to their feet, clutch rags around them, race off into the deeper darkness. They were scared of me. I had no idea who or what they were – surely not regular crew. Perhaps a population who had been here since the founding of the great hull, eking out an existence entirely out of view. They might have been here for a hundred years, maybe more.

I wondered why they were tolerated. I wondered if they'd been taken from Baal. I limped after them, fascinated despite my discomfort. I doubted anyone had studied them before, and hoped I'd be the first. It might even end up forming a part of my great work.

I clambered over an open hatchway, grazing my hands on the rusty air-seal, and found myself in a very long gallery. It was almost entirely dark, with a high vaulted roof shaped in a gothic arch. The floor was greasy and reflective, the walls were ribbed with pilasters. It smelled vaguely metallic, with an undernote of something greasier and more biological.

I couldn't see where the people had run off to. I could barely see anything. I reached into my jacket with shaking hands and withdrew a handheld lumen. After a few fumbling attempts I got the beam to focus and swept it up and around. The architecture was very strange – tortuous friezes

and panels of intricate stonework, all black and glistening, with no easily discernible pattern to it. Like everything the Legion made, it was incredibly detailed, but the shapes were elusive, almost serpentine.

I felt an enormous sense of foreboding, but crept further down the long gallery, relying on the little pool of light from my lumen to mark the way ahead. I aimed it downward and saw a single tread in the filth at my feet – the mark of a boot, far bigger than a baseline human's. I stared at it for a moment. So the Legion's Astartes clearly did come down here.

Then I heard a distant crash in the shadows, and it made me start. Probably something very far off – an engine-shaft or a piston or a valve misfiring – but it set my heart hammering. I kept on going, consumed now with both fear and curiosity.

Then I saw it. The altar. It emerged out of the darkness like a ship slipping out of the void. Made of what appeared to be a single slab of some dark stone, beautifully ornamented, a metre high and three metres long. It was surrounded by a trench that was wet with an oily liquid. Above the altar, on the imposing walls, were carvings. None of them resembled anything I'd seen before on an Imperial ship. They didn't look Baalite either, to the extent I could judge. I could almost hear Iacton Qruze's grizzled voice echoing around me as I gazed up at them.

The Revenant Legion, they were.

I edged nearer, my head close to splitting now, my throat dry. There was a man's body on the altar, lying on its back, legs together, arms outstretched. The corpse was naked, its flesh as white as alabaster. Its skin was withered, pulled tight to the bone, and appeared to be flaking away as if desiccated. The corpse's throat was ripped apart, like an animal had got at it. Runnels carved into the altar-top ran away from the site of the wound in shallow channels around the outstretched cadaver, then out towards two receptacles for golden chalices. Those things were truly spectacular: gold vessels encrusted with jasper and jade, glimmering softly in the deep dark. I looked over the rim of one of them – the bowl was almost too big for me to have lifted two-handed – and saw black stains running down to the dregs.

I pulled back, horrified. My heels crunched on something, and I looked down to see a snapped bone. I angled the lumen-beam around and saw more bones scattered across the sticky floor. In the alcoves on either side were whole skeletons, some slumped into piles, some hanging from chains.

I ran. I slipped on the bloody floor and ran. My sickness was now doused by my terror. The corpse on Ylech had been the same – drained of blood, sucked clean, its flesh torn to satisfy some unnatural urge, and now I knew for certain that it had been done by *them.* There could be no doubt. Something was very wrong, something that had been taken with them from before the great change, something that festered and lingered and hadn't been eradicated.

I stumbled, slipping to my knees and sliding through the gunk on the deck. I heard what sounded like heavy clunks far behind me, echoing down the long nave, and staggered back to my feet. I was panicking, hyperventilating, barely able to see. I ran wildly, my damp clothing flapping around me.

Just ahead, I caught sight of a narrow opening, a slice of pale light amid the heavy darkness. I sprinted for it, my lungs burning. Everything was blurred, rushed, broken, and the engine noise around me had become a roar, but I still heard them – the bootfalls coming for me, not hurrying but heavy, purposeful.

I almost got there. I saw the open doorway, maybe leading back into more corridors, maybe just further into that dismal maze of ancient madness. It wouldn't save me – I knew that – but I kept going out of instinct, right up until the moment the gauntlet closed on my shoulder and hauled me back.

It was just as it had been on Ylech. I was pulled from my feet, twisted around, held effortlessly in one hand like a bundle of rags. I found myself staring straight into the very same helm-mask, with the very same markings and the very same burning-eye motif.

'I'm under protection!' I squeaked, ridiculously, a blurt of sheer terror and pointlessness.

The Astartes' helm lenses gave nothing away. He looked at me for a moment, and all I could think of was that he was deciding how best to kill me.

'You should not be here,' he growled eventually, starting to march again. 'This ends now.'

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FOURTEEN

I don’t remember much of what happened immediately after that. I was virtually carried by him, I think, my feet slipping and sliding on the deck as I tried to keep up. We travelled down more of those interminable corridors, through more of those dark-drenched chambers. I caught sight of none of that underworld’s denizens – sensibly, they were staying away.

Eventually we entered a circular chamber somewhere even deeper into the heart of the *Red Tear*’s underbelly. The architecture was similar to the gallery where I’d found the altar, though cleaner. A high vault rose above us, terminating in a red lantern that cast a bloody glow over the black metal surroundings. I was thrown into a seat – a high-backed iron chair that had been built for Space Marine dimensions. My captor stood in front of me. I tried to focus on him.

‘You are Ofanim,’ I said, my words slurring slightly. I felt feverish and exhausted.

He just stared at me. He carried a sword at his belt, one with a cluster of jewelled ornamentation on the hilt, and I couldn’t help but think he was itching to use it. When he spoke at last, his voice was surprisingly even.

‘You have the countenance of the primarch,’ he said. ‘That is the only reason you are alive.’

‘It’s my job,’ I said, trying to muster just a little defiance. ‘To document what I see.’

‘Those places should have been secure. I do not know why they were not.’

I could feel myself starting to hyperventilate again, and struggled to calm down. He hadn’t killed me yet. He hadn’t drawn his blade.

‘What happens there?’ I asked.

‘Old rites,’ came the reply. Except the Ofanim had said nothing – a second door had opened soundlessly, and the primarch had entered.

Just as when I’d seen him for the first time, he seemed to light the space up. A rose-gold refraction glittered from the many fine points on his armour. He was unhelmed, and his long hair fell loosely across his dented gorget.

My captor bowed to the primarch, shot me a final inscrutable look, and withdrew. The doors slid closed behind him, leaving me alone with my subject.

‘How did you–’ I started.

‘I wondered if you’d keep going,’ Sanguinius said calmly, coming over to face me. I sat uncomfortably in the chair, wanting to squirm my way into its structure. The primarch’s battleplate bore the scars of recent fighting – he must have come here straight from docking with the flagship. ‘I wondered if you’d be able to resist the urge to keep digging.’

‘You could have stopped it.’

‘I could have done.’

‘You didn’t.’

Sanguinius folded his arms, and I saw the great shadow of his wings rustle behind him. ‘Do you not remember what I told you, when we met for the first time?’

Record truly, and without fear.

‘I should ask you, then,’ I said, carefully. ‘What happened down here?’

The primarch paused, searching for the right words. ‘A shadow lingers,’ he said. ‘One we carry with us.’ He smiled dryly. ‘You were right. We wear masks over that shadow. All of us know it. The populace of our ships knows it. My brother Horus knows it. Anyone intelligent, I would say, must know it. And yet it is never spoken of. Why not? Because it is easier to believe in surfaces, and harder to believe in the flesh beneath.’

‘It is horrific.’

‘I know.’

‘I can’t get it out of my head.’

‘You are not required to.’

I pulled in a deep breath. I was scared still, my heart still beating too hard and fast. Was that the fate that awaited me, now – to be bound on one of those altars, my body drained of blood and my mind emptied of its memories? If it was, there was nothing I could do to stop it. All that remained was to keep talking, the thing I always did, the one course of action that made the nightmare a little less real.

‘My colleague. Judita,’ I said. ‘I think she worships you.’

‘I’ve been worshipped all my life. I’ll be worshipped in the future, too.’

‘What do you think about that?’

‘My father is the most powerful being I have ever met. His abilities qualify Him amply by most definitions I can think of to be a god, and yet He has always resisted it. If He resists, then I can hardly do differently.’

‘But it doesn’t displease you?’

‘It’s nonsense. All of it. Trust me when I say that I believe in the Imperial Truth without question.’

It was happening again. Just as it had done when we’d first spoken, the fear was ebbing, my memory of the horror was fading fast, and I wanted to push back, to pry a little deeper. ‘You cannot think that,’ I said. ‘The way you talk, the way you *are*. You see things, don’t you? You fight in a way that’s impossible. You act in a way that’s impossible. You see things before they happen.’

‘And you would know all about that too,’ he replied. ‘You do not sleep. You dream. You dream so completely that the barrier between the real world and imagination becomes thin, and it feeds into your work. Thus you sense our own true selves, even when we never speak of it. Even when it makes you ill.’ He looked around him, glancing with what looked like distaste at his surroundings. ‘We are becoming more than this. Our species. A casket of wonders without precedent. The galaxy must be cleared of peril before these gifts can be used, and that is the purpose of the crusade. The alternative is to repeat the horrors of the past.’

‘So what do you see ahead?’ I asked.

‘Nothing definite. Fragments, possibilities. Some rendered invalid by choices made, some subtly different when the march of time catches up.’

‘Then you foresaw this meeting?’

‘No.’

‘But you let my investigation continue.’

‘I told you to go where the truth took you.’

I shifted in my seat. The metal was strangely warm, as if it sheathed a reactor beneath it. ‘I spoke to one of your warriors. In his private chamber, he created visions of hell. Of himself, in hell. All the rest of your people are the same, I think – tortured, trying to escape something, falling back. Only when you fight do you seem to be free of it.’

‘The curse was laid heavily on us,’ Sanguinius said. ‘The Legion was cursed from the start, and in the early years they indulged it. No one schooled them any different, so they acted their curse out, let it dominate them. They satisfied their appetites. Appalling things were done, atrocities that should never have occurred, but who was helping them? Who was lifting them out of the mire and showing them another way? No one. Not my father, not Malcador. On the contrary, they were thrown into the worst of situations, ones that would have crushed any force that did not resort to the methods they used. They rose up, time and again, never quite dying, never quite living, always shunned. You ask me why they carry the torture. Nothing has changed. The implanted organs are the same. The demands made are the same. Their blood is what it always was.’

‘And that is what the Ofanim watch for. The resurgence of the old.’

‘The cancer is in the bones, but it cannot be allowed to spread. We are brutal with ourselves, when we have to be. Just as brutal as those who wish to destroy us.’

‘What happens to those who succumb?’

‘They are taken away. Or they find absolution in death. The latter is preferable, for all concerned.’

I remembered Aelion then. ‘Is that what happened to the one I met? The creator of those visions?’

‘Do you really think I would tell you, if it were?’

So they had taken him away. He would surely have preferred to have indulged his madness on Murder. *I want people to think that I died well.* What happened to those who were sent back to Baal? What recompense could they make there for their weakness?

There was a great cruelty to this, it felt to me, a great waste. He’d been so vigorous, so alive, the most dynamic of all those I’d met. But I guessed the Legion had little choice, and was sure they took no pleasure in their means

of containment. They were wrestling with a sickness that had shadowed them from birth, and only the strongest remedies would answer.

For all that, it made me despondent.

‘I saw a corpse on this ship,’ I said. ‘It looked drained of blood. I saw a corpse on Ylech too – the same. If your people wish to change, they have a long road ahead of them.’

For the first time, Sanguinius looked irritated – anger, perhaps, or maybe guilt. ‘You have *no idea* what I ask of them,’ he said, his voice urgent. ‘All of them. The pursuit of beauty transfigures the suffering. It sanctifies it, it transforms it. And still the old rages bubble, just under the skin. If they lapse, when the flesh is weak, then they have already merited absolution a hundred times over. Thousands of my sons lie across the battlefields of a hundred worlds, all for my father’s cause. Their blood nourishes the fields that will one day produce crops for an eternal empire. You have no idea what it is like for them. No idea at all.’

‘Sure. But many have suffered for this Imperium.’

His eyes flashed, angry still. ‘And many more will suffer, before all is done. But a cure will be found. We will overcome it. We will rise above it. That is my promise to them.’

As he spoke, I got a brief ghost of a vision in the darkness, just like one of my dreams, but waking – of Blood Angels marching in ranks of purest white, their red armour bleached clean, a golden seraph flying above them. The sun was rising, and pennants were snapping in the winds of a purified atmosphere. The torture was gone, and only the artistry remained. They had transmuted lead into gold. They had completed their alchemy.

Then I looked down at my hands. The vision faded away, and all that was left was old filth.

‘I cannot unsee what I witnessed,’ I said. ‘You’ll have to kill me, if you want this to remain secret.’

‘Kill you?’ I thought I saw fangs gleam in the dark, briefly. ‘No. That is for the old world, and we are building a new one.’ His expression became almost mournful. ‘Your colleague is correct, though. Images are important. Icons are important. The crusade must conclude. It must reach its end without being derailed. Nothing will be published before then. Once all is accomplished, we will need accurate histories, and you may say what you wish. I know that, by then, I will have cured whatever sickness still remains. We will have escaped the bonds that have bound us for too long.’

I looked back up at him. ‘You truly believe you can overcome it?’

‘When my father’s vision is achieved, nothing shall be beyond us. Nothing at all. Why else would we risk so much for it?’

I thought about that for a long time.

‘You’re very complicated,’ I said in the end. ‘When I started this, I thought I’d prove that you weren’t as impressive as your reputation suggested. No one could be. But now, just as I discover the flaws are real, you turn full circle again. I have one great doubt, though.’

Sanguinius raised an elegant eyebrow. ‘Which is?’

‘You.’ I tried to smile weakly, but failed. ‘You’re the architect of this transformation. Without you, all their labour – all their study and their skill – will not be enough. It’s a dangerous business, war. Even the greatest can fall.’

I don’t know if I meant that entirely seriously. Having seen him fight, I couldn’t conceive of anything that could stand against him, but as soon as the words left my mouth, the thought began to crystallise, to firm up, to become something like a possibility, a concern, a spectre of doubt. Was this the source of the torment that I always sensed with him, just under the skin? Did this too worry away at him, despite all the surface invincibility?

Sanguinius merely nodded. If I’d expected him to be angered by the suggestion, or even surprised, I was wrong. ‘I do not plan to die,’ he said, simply.

‘It’s a hostile galaxy.’

‘Not any more. And the danger shrinks with every year.’

And that was when I got the last spike of real fear – the chill of recognition that he was dissembling again. That he knew more than he was letting on, and that he indeed had misgivings that he could never share. I have no idea why I was so certain about that. Maybe he was right, and I had some undisclosed powers of my own, or maybe I’d just got good at recognising the signs. But in spite of everything – the fury of battle, the corpses, the secrets, the agonised artworks – this was the thing that gave me the deepest pang of misgiving.

‘So what’s next for you, when the xenos have all been slaughtered here?’ I asked.

‘I will consult with Horus,’ he said. ‘There is already talk of us handling Kayvas for them.’

‘Don’t go.’

Sanguinius laughed. ‘Don’t go? You have a more pressing task for us, do you?’

‘This is a path that is unfolding without deliberation, taken at the behest of others.’

‘That is the way of the crusade.’

‘But you’ve foreseen something, haven’t you? You doubt yourself, but it’s there. Listen to the fear, just this once.’ I became even more agitated. ‘Go back to Baal. You haven’t finished your work. You could make that world impregnable, utterly safe from harm, ready for the completion of your designs.’

Sanguinius’ laugh died on his lips. A look of deep disappointment came over his features. ‘Listen to yourself. *Safe from harm.* Not one of my sons wishes that for himself, and neither do I.’ He sighed. ‘I have been surrounded by poisons all my life, but the very worst of them is doubt. Visions may be false, dreams can be lies. The only response is to march out to meet them.’

Of course he thought that. He’d been made to think that. I thought how many tens of thousands of warriors were on these ships, how formidable they were, how violent, and how utterly lost.

‘Go back to Baal,’ I said, feebly, knowing it would never happen. ‘Complete the alchemy there.’

‘That is not how it works. We were not created to be content, like herd creatures safe in a pasture. We were meant to strike out, pierce the darkness. And we shall do so always.’

I looked up at him. I saw the severe beauty of his frame, his armour, his bearing. I’d wanted to believe that there was a flaw in it, something I could uncover and expose. Now I knew the flaw was there, and I had seen the grisly effects of it, but I also saw the quest to overcome it. Sanguinius had not come to redeem the Legion’s affliction, he *was* the Legion’s affliction – but he was also the only route they had out of it. The poison and the cure, bundled up together, impossible to prise apart.

‘I’ll write that down,’ I told him. ‘All of it. The gold, and what lies beneath the gold.’

He nodded. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘I meant what I said – record truly.’

I bowed, and resolved to do so.

‘For as long as I live, you have my protection,’ Sanguinius told me. ‘And thus you have nothing to fear.’

After that, I couldn’t stay on the *Red Tear*. I couldn’t have slept in my cell, knowing something of what took place on the lower decks. I still didn’t understand what rites went on there, only that they were lapses now, throwbacks to earlier, more rampant excesses. I didn’t know if the victims were willing, believing that they took part in some religious ceremony, or whether they were simply prey. It didn’t matter – either possibility was incompatible with the Imperial Truth and would have damned the Legion if it were widely known.

I took a lighter over to another Legion ship, one crewed exclusively by serfs and with no Astartes present. The Baalite excess was still there across the lesser ship’s interior, of course – the obsession with decoration and refinement – but it was an emptier practice there, not a conscious attempt to rise above primeval weakness. The serfs found me a cell, gave me room to work, managed to have my belongings transferred over a day or two later.

My headaches got better. I dreamed less. I even managed a few hours’ sleep. So perhaps the primarch was right about me – maybe it was proximity to him, or even his sons, that triggered the worst of my symptoms.

The words began to flow. I described it all – the splendour, the martial prowess, the bravery, as well as the heritage of shame they hadn’t yet managed to expunge. I described Aelion’s self-portrait, his descent into a kind of blood-fuelled madness, and speculated on its cause. Most of all, I wrote of the Great Angel himself, his contradictions, his imperfections, the distance between what the Imperium needed him to be and what he actually was.

So much remained opaque, even to him. I couldn’t shake the feeling that his foresight was more of a curse than a boon, for all that it made him so deadly. He couldn’t avoid his duty, even if he had some inkling that he was being led down a path whose end he couldn’t see. As a weapon, he was like a fine stiletto – lethal but brittle, not because he was in any way weak, but because so much depended on him. I thought of Widera’s pictures, and realised how it must have pained him to have his image reproduced cheaply in runs of millions, plastered over walls in gloomy manufactoria or in Army parade grounds. He genuinely had no desire to be Warmaster, to be venerated, and his pleasure at Horus’ promotion had not been feigned.

The Emperor must have known all these things. He must have done. Had He spared His most popular son, out of awareness of his inner turmoil? Or

was He more ruthless than that, seeing Horus as the more reliable of the two, the one best fitted to enact His grand vision? Maybe both those things. Or maybe, being the creator of the entire brotherhood, He knew even more than anyone else, and some other factor was at work.

I thought about changing the title of my monograph. *Fallen Angel* was one idea, but it was too close to my previous unlamented work. *Dark Angel* was another, but I dropped that for obvious reasons.

In the end, I kept it as it was. *The Great Angel.* I couldn't separate Sanguinius from the vile things done by his sons. As Qruze had said, accurately, a primarch and his gene-warriors were two sides of the same coin – the followers only aped the characteristics that their primogenitors gave them. But that was how I thought of him: a damaged, contradictory character, trying to overcome internal flaws for the sake of those who depended on him. That felt more properly heroic to me than all the undoubted combat excellence. It made him more like us. He was playing the deck he'd been dealt, and maybe he would find a way to triumph using it, in the end becoming as great as his propaganda made him.

Of course, not everyone saw it like that. Widera came to see me soon after she found out I'd left the flagship. I could have asked to be kept away from her, I suppose, given that she'd clearly decided my sanity had been blown and that her gamble in employing me had backfired. In the end I let her come, as much out of curiosity as anything else.

She didn't look angry, when she finally entered my new chamber. She didn't even look resigned. Just tired, I thought.

'You could have told me where you'd gone,' she said, sitting down on the spare chair without my asking her to.

I looked up at her over the piles of notes I'd made. 'I thought you wanted me confined.'

That made her start. So she still didn't know I'd overheard her outside Aelion's rooms. 'Well, you were worrying me for a while.'

'I worried myself.'

She looked at me for a long time, as if searching for signs of madness or stress. 'You look depressed.'

I sighed, and pushed my data-slate away. 'Maybe I'd hoped to fail,' I said. 'And find that the illusion was as good as the reality. I can't pretend it doesn't make me discouraged.'

‘It doesn’t need to.’ She shuffled her chair forward, leaned her elbows on her knees. ‘The illusion *is* the reality. It creates it. Believe in perfection, and we end up achieving it.’

‘You really think that.’

‘I do.’ There was a trace of fervour in her eyes then, and I wondered for the first time which one of us was under the greater mental strain. ‘Think of what he *is*,’ she said. ‘A man? No. Not even a primarch. He’s an idea. And the idea is in the head of billions, each of them living and working and fighting. Would it even matter if he’d never existed? Maybe not, not if the concept did. They fight for the Angel, they die for him, and they keep doing it. The only thing that would stop them is if they had the idea destroyed.’

‘Nothing could do that now.’

‘I’m not so sure. You write persuasively. The things you uncovered are dangerous.’

I looked up at her sharply. ‘What do you know of what I’ve uncovered?’

She rolled her eyes. ‘I’ve been with this fleet for long enough, and I’m not entirely stupid. You think I never went below decks? You think I didn’t ever talk to the serfs on the gun levels?’ She shook her head. ‘The only difference is that it doesn’t matter to me. Survival matters. Getting out the other side. We need to believe.’

I almost admired her single-mindedness. I couldn’t pretend that she didn’t have a point – I’d read the histories of Old Night.

‘I told him I’d keep it under wraps until the crusade was done,’ I said. ‘You can relax.’

Widera shot me a contemptuous look. ‘Too dangerous,’ she said, then leaned back in her seat, hands clasped behind her head. ‘You must destroy the work now. It must never be read.’

Now it was my turn to look at her with disdain. ‘You brought me here!’ I blurted. ‘You got me started.’

‘Yes, and I regret it every day.’

I shook my head dismissively. ‘It will be completed. Everything I know. The Legion, its master. And there’s nothing you can do – I operate under his countenance.’

‘For now.’

I laughed at her. ‘Oh, you think he’ll change his mind?’

Widera got up. ‘Nothing lasts forever,’ she said. ‘Save for one thing. The world we build. Some of us are already becoming its servants, because we

see beyond the immediate horizon. Primarchs are merely instruments. One day they'll be memories. That is what concerns me now.'

She meant every word of that. It made me more than uncomfortable. For so long I'd assumed Widera was captivated by Sanguinius himself, caught up in his real presence, but now it was clear that it had always been about the possibilities. She was enthralled all right, but to what she could *do* with him, not what he *was*. The remembrancers were supposed to be the servants of the Imperium, the ones who meekly chronicled its rise to dominance. We were never supposed to shape that dominance.

But I didn't say anything to her. I let her leave.

Once she'd gone, I looked down at what I'd been writing. I saw Iacton Qruze's words on the data-slate. He'd been a pompous, faded old warrior, but I don't think he'd been wrong.

What they are now, he once was. And what they were then, he is now.

That had to be known. Somehow, in some form or other, that had to be known.

So I bent my head, and carried on writing.

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EPILOGUE

She rose from her desk, left the auto-quill in its sheath, and walked up to the glass-paned doors.

Her body protested. Many things had been conquered over the last few centuries, but not ageing. Not quite. A life could be extended far beyond the dreams of ancient humanity, but it came at a cost. At a certain point, every decade was a little harder, a little more painful. You couldn't go on forever – only as long as you needed in order to complete your duty. Her eyes weren't blue any more – the replacements had only come in brown – and her skin tone had greyed.

She limped up to the doors. Her chambers were in the new approved style, the one that all construction seemed to employ these days. Dark stone, carved into gargoyles and bony ridges, high pointed arches, spires, dimly lit, encrusted with skulls. She liked it.

She clasped her withered hands behind her back and took in the view. It was night. Then again, it was always night, more or less, on Terra. The battles that had ravaged this world were centuries old, but still the weather system had not been fixed. Perhaps some people thought it should be a permanent reminder, a visible record of what the species could do to itself. She quite liked that idea. Make the entire world a monument. A shrine.

An alert blipped at her collar. Skevo was on his way. She dismissed it.

Outside, a billion lights twinkled in the darkness. Some of those were windows speckled across the flanks of habitation spires, each unit housing tens of thousands of souls. Other lights came from the construction machines that crawled like giant insects across a hundred more building sites. They had turned the poisoned soils into materials, melted down the war-constructs of the Traitor and fashioned them into scaffolding for fresh spires. The towers all looked much the same, once completed – black-and-grey monoliths festooned with grimy aquilas and forbidding skull-friezes. The effect was numbing, even in the poor light of day: rank upon rank of heavy lintels and jagged pinnacles, like an army of golems frozen into rockcrete but ready to march.

She reached for the handle on the door, opened it. Hot, dry air wafted in, tasting of dust and exhaust fumes. She moved out onto the narrow balcony, one set hundreds of metres up. The view was commanding – kilometre upon kilometre of spires, all half-built and webbed with struts and cargo elevators. The old terrain that had been fought over so bitterly was buried under it all, a blanket of rockcrete and steel that kept the last remnants locked away and out of sight.

She took in a deep breath, enjoying the smell of a world recreating itself. Hundreds of aircraft droned overhead, many of them belonging to the newly official Holy Orders. It had been hard work – *very* hard work – turning the Imperium's underground religious bodies into elements of the rapidly expanding Adeptus Terra. There had been horrific fights, some of them fully deserving the name of wars, between rival interpreters of Keeler's legacy. She herself had come to those late, but a lifetime spent with the Legions had taught her a thing or two about negotiating dangerous waters.

All was unfolding as it should do. The old nonsense of the Imperial Truth had been comprehensively erased from the minds of the people. Save for a few holdouts in the Adeptus Astartes, whose grip over the Imperium had in any case been loosened following the Codex reforms, no one now doubted that the Emperor was a god, and no one now doubted that His divinity was all that stood between them and a repeat of the Great Heresy. The foundations had been laid and were now being built upon with all the same industry that raised the physical spires around them.

It was just as she'd always told Kautenya – symbols mattered. He'd understood that, she thought, but only to the extent that there was

something *under* them to give them meaning. He'd persevered with that delusion for decades, never willing to accept the truth that the surface was all there was.

See, she herself had no illusions about the Emperor. He wasn't a god. He probably wasn't even alive any more. The only thing that mattered was that people believed He was. They had to. Even a flicker of doubt, even a shadow of it, and the game was up.

Cynical? No. Realistic. Whatever was necessary. Everything at all, or nothing at all. Sanguinius, poor doomed Sanguinius, had known that perfectly. He'd hidden what needed to be hidden, and shown what needed to be shown.

A proximity indicator blinked to red. Skevo was in the building now, getting closer.

Lumen-banks flickered on, far below her. She looked down to see the giant causeway, one carved through ancient ruins and more recent habitations alike so that it created a single immense processional corridor through the growing labyrinths of construction. Just as the lumens came on, a thousand lanterns swayed up from ground-level silos, floating in shoals through the toxic atmosphere and turning the smog banks a sullen crimson. Cheering broke out – a surge of sound like the oceans finally coming in across this desiccated world, spilling out of every half-finished hab and every semi-complete cathedral. You had to screw your eyes up to see them, the millions of individuals, all crammed across every balcony and viewing station, every landing pad and transitway, so dense and packed together that they looked like they constituted the soil of the planet itself.

The cheers went on. They were wild cheers, desperate cheers, cheers of relief and terror and adulation. No coercion had been needed in shepherding those crowds to the viewing platforms, even though priests with electro-staves had been stationed at the exits. Every roar of affirmation was genuine, bred from a fertile landscape of remembered terror and – just to be on the safe side – constant psycho-propaganda.

At the terminus of the causeway rose a gigantic pile of granite and rockcrete, a many-layered gargantuan heap of imposing Ecclesiarchal excess. Its flanks were floodlit and blazing, its many ramparts filled with trenches of wildfire, its high pulpits thrumming with vox-amplified recordings of the Approved Chants.

The place was vast, huge almost beyond comprehension, and still it wasn’t finished. Unimaginable sums of coin had been sunk into its foundations, its towers, its clerestories and its shadowed chapels. Even in its embryonic state it was grander and more imposing than all but the very greatest buildings of the Unity-era Imperium. It didn’t even have a name yet, but she knew what it would be called in time – the Cathedral of the Emperor Deified. In its vaults and catacombs, thousands of young recruits were being trained, being armed, being prepared for their dispersal into the void. Grand devotional paintings were being pored over by gangs of sanctioned artists, stone was being covered in gold leaf, censers were being forged.

Emperor Deified.

You could laugh about that, if it weren’t already becoming dangerous to do so. Even her chambers weren’t free of spy-devices.

A nervous knock rang out from the door behind her.

‘Come,’ she said, gazing out at the scenes of growing frenzy below.

Skevo scuttled in at last, clutching the box to his chest. He shuffled up to stand beside her, looking and smelling worse than he had done when she’d commissioned him. She glanced down at him briefly, remembering how even the lowliest Legion serfs had been in the fleets, and couldn’t help a faint spasm of disgust.

‘You got it?’ she asked.

Skevo handed it to her. ‘The very last one,’ he said, gleefully, anxious to curry favour.

She took the box, laid it on a tabletop just next to her. ‘Did you breach the seals?’ she asked.

‘Oh, no,’ he said, shaking his head vigorously.

‘And it’s never been accessed?’

‘No. Not since it was deposited.’

‘Good. You may go.’

Skevo grinned, sure that he’d given the correct answers, and scampered off. Once he was out of the doors, she activated her security detail and gave them the kill-order.

Of course he’d looked.

With that trail tidied up, she turned her attention back to the scene below. The moment of climax was almost there. She folded her arms, leaned against the metal frame, and watched.

The southern front of the great cathedral, the one immediately facing her, was an enormous blank screen of stone bordered with clusters of columns that held up a soaring entablature of the same material, decorated with more skull-icons. Alone in the otherwise heavily lit-up scene, it remained in total darkness, a coffin-shaped clot of night set right at the centre of the fiery expanse around it.

The signal was given – a massed volley from ranks of Astra Militarum armour stationed along the causeway's left-hand edge – and more lumens blazed into life. Starbursts went off high above, followed by the blare of war-horns from attendant Titans. The unlit stone wall flooded with life and colour: a two-hundred-metre fresco of Sanguinius battling megarachnids, his armour resplendent gold, his spear shining, the xenos wilting under his steely gaze.

For all her cynicism, she couldn't help a swell of pride. It had been one of her best, that depiction. Even Kautenya had admired it. None of the crowds would know the precise designation of xenos in the image, but they would understand the message well enough.

The protector. The smiter of the unclean. The flawless son of the Emperor at war.

They were now in absolute raptures. The roar was incredible, boiling up from the chasms below and spilling out into the floodlit cloud banks above. Hundreds of thousands were waving, cheering, pressing forward to the railings of their pens, trying to reach out to touch it. Millions more would be watching on vid-feeds. Billions would see it on propaganda-reels sent out to the reconstruction zones. Trillions off-world would pick it up in the months to come, poring over it around creaking generators and faulty projector-rigs.

It would spread. Faster than a disease, more completely than a law, deeper than a command. The idea. The image. The religion.

Sanguinala.

She remembered the last time she'd seen Kautenya then. The surprise on his face, the amazement that she'd tracked him down in the wreckage of the Imperium's outer marches. He shouldn't have been surprised. She'd given him fair warning, and no guardians lived forever – not flesh-and-blood ones, anyway. She hadn't relished killing him, but it hadn't troubled her much either. Some things simply needed to be done.

Thinking of that, she turned away from the riotous celebrations and opened the casket Skevo had brought her. Seeing the battered old parchment copy gave her an uncharacteristic pang of nostalgia. They had been so young back then. So full of certainty. She ran an aged finger over the cover, tracing out Kautenya's crabbed handwriting. She turned a couple of pages, reading a few extracts.

The poison and the cure, bundled up together, impossible to prise apart.

She wondered about keeping it. Just one copy. Everything was there, a priceless record of a complex history, one that could be invaluable if strife ever came again. So much had been lost from that age, never to be retrieved, to the extent that even the basest scraps of connection had become relics of infinite value. And he'd worked so hard on it, both appalled and impressed by what he'd discovered. It was his masterwork, a piece of undoubted quality, for in the very brief time he'd spent with the Legion, he'd got to understand the primarch more than she'd done over many months, maybe even more so, in some ways, than the Blood Angels themselves.

But then she let the pages rustle back together, and retrieved an igniter from her cloak. She snapped the seal, tossed it into the metal box, and let the pages burn. She looked out again, and permitted herself to enjoy the adulation her own image was receiving.

It was beautiful. Just as beautiful as he had been in life: scrubbed clean, impeccable; no doubts, no secrets, just splendour. The Imperium had been all about a kind of truth once, and that had failed it. The lie was stronger, and it could be maintained into eternity.

'This is what you have to be now, for all of us,' she said, watching the fires burn higher. 'Sanguinius. The Great Angel.'

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Warhawk*, *Scars* and *The Path of Heaven*, the Primarchs novels *Leman Russ: The Great Wolf* and *Jaghatai Khan: Warhawk of Chogoris*, the novellas *Brotherhood of the Storm*, *Wolf King* and *Valdor: Birth of the Imperium*, and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Space Wolves books *Blood of Asaheim*, *Stormcaller* and *The Helwinter Gate*, as well as the Vaults of Terra trilogy, *The Lords of Silence* and many more. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, and the Warhammer Crime novel *Bloodlines*. Chris lives and works in Bradford-on-Avon, in south-west England.

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An extract from *The Solar War*.

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Terra

On the first of Primus the sirens rang across Terra.

On the myriad worlds conquered and ruled by the Imperium of Man, they talked of year divisions, of time sliced into a thousand equal slivers. First division, second division, third, and so on, without variation or character, until the weight of counting reached a thousand, and one year tipped over into the next. On worlds of endless night or blinding days, a year was the same. In an empire spanning a galaxy, anything else would have been meaningless.

0000014.M31 was how surviving records would mark the first moment of that day, stamped and corrected for temporal accuracy, standardised and stripped of any meaning. But, here, on the world whose night and day and seasons had given mankind its concept of time, the old counting still meant something and so did the moment that one year died and another was born: the Feast of Two Faces, the Day of New Light, the Renewal – on and on went its names. But for longer than memory it had been the first of Primus, firstborn of the three hundred and sixty-five days that would follow, a day of hope and new beginnings.

The turning of that year began with snow on the northern battlements of the Imperial Palace, where three brother demigods watched the night skies above. It began with the dawn light and icy chill reaching into a tower-top chamber and stirring the painted cards dealt by a man who was older than any knew. It began with the sirens calling out, one at first, high on the Palace spires, before the cry was picked up by others, on and on across the turning globe. The sound echoed through the mountain-sized space ports and rasped from vox-horns in the deep strata of the Atlantean Hives.

On and on it went, stilling the hands of people as they ate and worked. They looked up. In caves beneath the earth, and hive vaults, and under the smog drifts, they looked up. Of those that could see the sky, a few thought they could make out new stars amongst the firmament and froze at the

promise of each pinprick of light: a promise of fire and ash and an age of loss. And with the sound of sirens, fear spread, unnamed but still spoken.

‘He is here,’ they said.

Prison ship Aeacus*, Uranus high orbit*

‘I understand you have a story…’ she said. The wolf stood before her, the fur of its back silver beneath the moonlight. ‘A particularly entertaining one. I’d like to remember it, for posterity.’

The wolf turned, its teeth a smile of sorrow.

‘Which story?’

‘Horus killing the Emperor.’

Mersadie Oliton woke from the memory-dream with sweat on her face. She breathed, and pulled the blanket over her from where it had slipped onto the floor. The air was cool and dank in the cell, scented with the tang of air that had been exhaled too much. She blinked for a second. Something was different. She reached out a hand and touched the metal wall. Moisture clung to the rivets and rust scabs. The thrum of the ship’s engines had gone. Wherever they were, they were stationary in the void.

She let her hand drop and let out a breath. The tatters of the memory-dream still clung to her eyelids. She focused, trying to pull back the threads of the dream even as they slid into darkness.

‘I must remember…’ she said to herself.

‘The prisoner will stand and face the wall.’ The voice boomed out of the speaker set above the cell door.

She stood instinctively. She wore a grey jumpsuit, worn and faded. She put her hands on the wall, fingers splayed. The door unlocked with a clang, and footsteps sounded on the grated floor. The guard would be one just like the rest: crimson-clad and silver-masked, the humanity in its voice concealed by vox distortion. All the gaolers were the same, as constant as the ticking of a clock that never struck the hour.

Small spaces, locked doors, questions and suspicions – such had been her world for the seven years since she had come back to the Solar System. That was the price for what she had seen, for what she remembered. She had been a remembrancer, one of the thousands of artists, writers and scholars sent out to witness the Great Crusade as it brought the light of reason to a reunited humanity. That had been her purpose: to see, to

remember. Like many clear purposes and shining futures, it had not worked out that way.

She heard the footsteps stop behind her, and knew the guard would be placing a bowl of water and a fresh jumpsuit on the floor.

‘Where are we?’ she asked, hearing the question come from her mouth before she could stop it.

Silence.

She waited. There would not be a punishment for her asking, no beatings, no withdrawal of food or humiliation – that was not how this imprisonment worked. The punishment was silence. She had no doubt that other, more visceral methods were used on other prisoners – she had heard the screams. But for her there had only been silence. Seven years of silence. They did not need to ask her questions, after all. They had taken the memory spools out of her skull, and those recordings would have told them everything they wanted and more.

‘We are still in the void, aren’t we,’ she said, still facing the wall. ‘The engine vibrations have stopped, you see. No way of missing it if you have spent any time on ships… I spent time on a warship once. You never lose the sense of it.’ She paused, waiting for a response, even if it was just the sound of retreating footsteps and the door shutting.

Silence again.

That was strange. She had tried talking to guards in the early years, and their response had been to leave her without reply. After a while, that had felt worse than if they had struck a whip across her back. They had never beaten her, though, or even touched her. Even when they opened her skull to remove the memory spools, they had sedated her, as though that made the violation that followed more acceptable.

She supposed that such small mercies had to do with Qruze or Loken. The former Luna Wolves had watched over her as much as they could. But that had still left her a prisoner of the greatest and darkest prison in the Imperium. Loken had said that he would free her, but she had refused. Even while it pained her, she understood why she had to remain locked up. How could she not? After all, had she not seen the true face of the enemy? Four years of life on the *Vengeful Spirit* amongst the Sons of Horus, in the shadow of their father, who now had set the galaxy alight with civil war. What other reward could there be for remembering those days? A galaxy

shrunk to silence and plasteel walls, with only dreams and memories to speak to her.

She had begun to dream memories after a few months, dreams of her home on Terra, of the sunlight shattering across the edge of the Arcus orbital plate, her mother laughing and calling after her as she ran through the hydro-gardens. And she had dreamed of her time amongst the Luna Wolves, and the Sons of Horus, of people now long dead. She had asked for parchment and pen, but none had been given to her. She had gone back to the old games her mind-nurse had taught her, ways of tucking memories away when she woke from sleep, ways of remembering the past even as it fled into the distance. In the silence, she had found that memories and dreams were all she had, all she was.

‘Are we still somewhere in the Solar System?’ she asked, and twitched her neck to look behind her. Why was she still talking? But then why had the guard not left? ‘The ship doesn’t feel like it’s preparing for translation. Where are we?’

They had come for her in her cell on the Nameless Fortress three nights ago. They had loaded her into a box barely big enough to stand upright in. She had felt the box judder and sway as machines had lifted it and her. They had let her out into this cell, and she had recognised the vibration of a void-ship under power. It had been comforting at first, but her dreams had not been, and now the silence of this moment was feeling stranger with each elongating second.

‘Why was I taken away from the fortress?’ she asked. ‘Where am I going?’

‘Where we all wish we could go, Mistress Oliton,’ said Garviel Loken. She whirled, and the end of her cell was gone and a wolf was rising from a pool of dark water beneath the moon. Its eyes were black spheres, and its bared-teeth grin was wide as it spoke. ‘You are going home.’

In the dark of her cell, Mersadie Oliton woke to silence and lay still, waiting for the dream to fade or for herself to wake again.

Strike Frigate Lachrymae**,** *Trans-Plutonian Gulf*

The first ship of the onslaught died as it breached the veil of reality. Streams of plasma reached out from gun platforms. White fire smashed into the ship’s prow. Lightning and glowing ectoplasm streamed behind its hull.

Macro shells detonated amongst the molten wounds already cut into its skin. Turrets and spires sheared from its bulk. Towers broke from its spine. It kept coming even as its bows were torn apart. The burning wreck struck the first of the mines scattered across the dark. Explosions burst around it. The front portion of the ship sheared from the back. Prow and gun decks hinged down. Atmosphere vented from the exposed interior. Debris scattered, burning for an eye-blink before the flames ate the air trapped in the wreckage.

‘Ship kill,’ called a sensor adept from across the bridge of the *Lachrymae*.

Sigismund watched the intruder’s death as it spread across the pict screens above the command dais. He was armoured, his sword chained to his wrist and resting point down on the deck at his feet. He did not blink or move as the dying ship tumbled across his sight. In the still depths of his mind he heard the words that had brought him to this place and time.

‘You must choose where to stand. By the words of your duty, or by your father’s side at the end.’

Around him the command crew was silent. Eyes fixed on instruments and screens. This was the beginning of the moment they had all known would end the years of waiting. Some, perhaps, had thought or hoped that it would never come. But here it was, marked with fire.

I chose, Keeler, he thought, and in his mind, he heard again the words that Dorn had spoken in judgement of that choice.

‘You will continue in rank and position as you have, and you will never speak to any other of this. The Legion and the Imperium will not know of my judgement. Your duty will be to never let your weakness taint those who have more strength and honour than you.’

‘As you will, father.’

‘I am not your father!’ roared Dorn, his anger suddenly filling the air, his face swallowed by dusk shadows. ‘You are not my son,’ he said quietly. ‘And no matter what your future holds, you never will be.’

‘I chose,’ he whispered to himself, ‘and here I stand at the end.’

The fire from the dead warship spread across the displays.

‘*If they come at us like this, the slaughter will barely be worth the sweat,*’ growled Fafnir Rann.

‘*They will not give us that luxury,*’ replied Boreas from further back on the platform. Sigismund did not look around at where the holo-projections

of the Assault captain or his lieutenant hovered at his shoulders. Each of them stood on the command deck of one of the *Lachrymae*'s sister ships.

Rann wore void-hardened Mark III armour, with reinforcing studs bonded to his shins and left shoulder. The scars of battles fought here, at the edge of the system, ran beneath the fresh yellow lacquer. His tall boarding shield hung in his right hand, the twin axes mag-locked to its back echoed in the heraldry painted on the shield's face. Sigismund imagined he could see the warped smile on Rann's face as he turned to Boreas and shrugged.

The holo-image of the First Lieutenant of the Templars did not move. Unhelmed, his face was a single twisted scar, and if there was any emotion beyond cold fury behind his eyes, Sigismund could not see it. Boreas' sword of office stood almost as tall as he did, its guard the cross of the Templars, its blade etched with the names of the dead.

'All ships, stand by,' said Sigismund softly, and heard the orders ripple out.

The vibration in the deck rose in pitch. The dull ache that had been building in his skull for the last hours was sharpening. He noticed one of the human deck crew shiver and wipe a hand across a bead of blood forming in her nose.

'Hold to our oaths and the strength of our purpose,' he called.

Whispers buzzed at the edge of his thoughts, razor tips scratching over metal. They had needed to sedate every astropath in the fleet two hours before, as a wave of psychic pressure had sent them babbling and screaming. It had become more intense with every passing moment, and it presaged one thing: it was the bow wave of a truly vast armada coming through the warp, bearing down on the Solar System like a storm front. Horus and the traitors were coming.

'Etheric surge detected!' shouted a sensor officer.

'*Here it comes,*' said Rann, and brought his fist to his chest. '*Honour and death.*'

'*For the primarch and Terra,*' said Boreas.

'For our oaths,' said Sigismund. The images of his two brothers blinked out.

He reached down and pulled his own helm from his belt and locked it in place over his head. 'May my strength be equal to this moment,' he said to himself as the helm display lit in his eyes. The data of the battle sphere overlaid his sight.

The Plutonian Gulf glittered with weapon platforms, torpedo shoals and mine drifts. Together they formed a great web, tens of thousands of kilometres deep, stretching from the very edge of night to the orbits of Pluto itself. Ships glinted amongst the defences: fast gun-sloops and monitor ships that were little more than engines and weaponry. They had been built in the orbital forges of Luna, Jupiter and Uranus and dragged to the edge of the sun's light. Alongside them lay the fleet of the First Sphere: hundreds of warships, all in motion. And beyond the warships, the moons of Pluto waited. Studded with weapons and hollow with tunnels, each was a fortress that could have stood against a fleet.

The sheet of stars erupted with lightning. Rents opened in the vacuum. Nauseating colours and dazzling light poured out as ship after ship surged from nothing into being. Tens, and then hundreds. The sensor servitors in the *Lachrymae* twitched and gabbled as targets multiplied faster than they could vocalise updates.

Mines detonated, explosions leaping from one to another in chains that stretched across the dark. Gun platforms opened up. Macro shells, rockets and plasma struck metal and stone, bored in and exploded. Ships died even as they tasted reality, armour stripped by fire, guts spilled into the dark. In the first ten seconds, over a hundred vessels burned to wreckage. Most had been former warships of the Imperial Army, crewed by humans who had given their oath to Horus and been rewarded with the honour of being the first to draw their blades in this battle. They died for that honour, burning too in the ruin of their ships, hulls shredded around them.

But they kept coming.

Ship after ship, tearing reality like flags waving in front of a gun-line. The first Legiones Astartes warship surfaced from the warp. It was named the *Erinyes*, and it was a bombardment galleon of the IV Legion: a five-kilometre-long hull wrapped around a trio of nova cannon barrels. She loosed all three shots as the void kissed her skin. Each nova cannon shell was the size of a Battle Titan, its core filled with unstable plasma. They had no target, but they needed none. They ran straight into the heart of the defences and exploded with the force and light of a star's birth. Gun platforms vanished. Mines lit off in spheres of red flame. Fire poured from the defences as more ships rammed past the debris of their dead kin.

The light of the blaze flooded through the *Lachrymae*'s screens and viewports. Sigismund's helm display dimmed.

‘Engage,’ he said, and the *Lachrymae* leapt forwards. Twenty strike cruisers and fast destroyers followed in tight formation. Lance fire speared out from them, slicing into ships as they cut across the front of the enemy fleet. Plumes of ghost-light and ectoplasm stretched like arms through the dark as more ships punched through from the warp.

A backwash of etheric lightning struck the Imperial Fists cruiser *Solar Son.* It spun, its hull cracking and crumpling as the laws of reality went into flux. The *Lachrymae* and its sisters did not pause but plunged on. They had one purpose in this moment: to kill as many of the enemy as possible while they clawed from the warp onto the shore of reality. For the moment, the Imperial Fists’ prey was vulnerable, and the First Sphere fleet were predators.

The *Lachrymae*’s guns found the skin of the gun-barge *Fire Oath* before it could light its void shields. Macro shells punched through gun decks and exploded. Munitions cooked off in loading hoists. The *Fire Oath*’s hull bulged, then burst. Building-sized pieces of hull scythed out, caught the flank of a battle cruiser as it emerged from the warp and tore its command castle from its back. The warp breach it had emerged from pulsed and swallowed the wreckage.

‘Hold,’ called Sigismund, his voice passing through the ships of his command via crackling vox-link. ‘For our oaths, we hold true.’

The *Lachrymae* sliced on while its mortal crew screamed as ghosts and nightmares flooded their sight. Reality in the battle sphere was now little more than tattered scraps blowing in the night. The *Lachrymae* rolled, her guns finding enemy after enemy. But for each one that died, another three came from the warp.

Deadfall torpedoes set in the void triggered and speared forwards. Carcasses of ships split and burned. Pluto’s fortress-moons found their range to the first of the invaders and spoke. Newly lit void shields flashed as they collapsed. Volleys answered. The reserve fleets holding close to the moons powered forwards and began to kill and die. The light of battle swelled, blurring with the glow of thousands of warp transitions, until which side was firing and which was burning was lost in a rippling blaze tens of thousands of kilometres across. Hours later, the light of that fire would glimmer in the night above the battlements of the Imperial Palace as the sirens called and alarums rang to tell that Horus had, at last, brought his war to the birth system of humanity.

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To Hannah, with love.
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Table of Contents

Cover
Backlist
Table of Contents
The Horus Heresy
Sanguinius : The Great Angel
- Prologue
- One
- Two
- Three
- Four
- Five
- Six
- Seven
- Eight
- Nine
- Ten
- Eleven
- Twelve
- Thirteen
- Fourteen
- Epilogue

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